FOUR SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT: CAUSES OF WORLD WAR I

The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary in the Balkan territory of Bosnia on June 28th, 1914 triggered World War I. The assassination was the spark that triggered this global conflict. Would the conflict have ended right where it began, in Bosnia, if deeper currents did not propel the European powers to war? Analyze this question by considering the following four schools of thought on causes of the war in Europe.

### School of Thought #1: Nationalism

Those who believe that nationalism was the main cause of World War I think that it was propelled by such factors as the desire of Slavic peoples in the Balkans of Southeast Europe to free themselves from the Austro-Hungarian empire, and the desire of Austria-Hungary, in turn, to crush rising spirits of nationalism among ethnic groups within their empire. Serbian Slavic nationalists were especially militant – Serbs within the Austro-Hungarian Empire demanding unification with the small Kingdom of Serbia. This led an ultra-nationalist Serb to assassinate the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, in Sarajevo, Bosnia. This was his drastic attempt to convince Austria-Hungary to provide Balkan Slavs the right to self-determination [the right to allow a people to decide for themselves under what government they wish to live].

In the Middle East, nationalists in Arab-speaking lands sought independence from the Ottoman Turkish empire.

Nationalist groups in Eastern Europe – specifically Georgia, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, and Poland – called for separation from the Russian empire. Russia also promoted Pan-Slavism (unification of all Slavs) in the Balkans, encouraging fellow Slavic-speaking peoples in their quest to throw off Austria-Hungary’s rule.

The peace treaties signed in Paris following the war led to the birth of a number of new nation states (Poland, Czechoslovakia, Turkey, and others) ruled by a dominant nationalist ethnic group. This shows that nationalism was in fact the major causative issue of the war. Self-determination for some ethnic groups in Europe had been achieved.

### School of Thought #2: The Balance of Power & Imperialism

This causative factor is summarized in a world history textbook by Jerry Bentley and Herbert Zeigler:

“Aggressive nationalism was also manifest in economic competition and colonial conflicts, fueling dangerous rivalries among European powers. The industrialized nations of Europe competed for foreign markets and engaged in tariff wars, but the most unsettling economic rivalry involved Great Britain and Germany. By the twentieth century Germany’s rapid industrialization threatened British economic predominance. British reluctance to accept the relative decline of British industry vis-à-vis [in relation to] German industry strained relations between the two economic powers.

Economic rivalries fomented [provoked] colonial competition. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, European nations searched aggressively for new colonies or dependencies to bolster economic performance. In their haste to conquer and colonize, the imperial powers stumbled over each other, repeatedly clashing in one corner of the globe or another....

Virtually all the major powers engaged in the scramble for empire, but the competition between Britain and Germany and that between France and Germany were the most intense and dangerous. Germany, a unified nation only since 1871, embarked on the colonial race belatedly but aggressively, insisting that it too must have its “place in the sun.” German imperial efforts were frustrated, however, by the simple fact that British and French imperialists had already carved up most of the world. German-French antagonisms and German-British rivalries went far toward shaping the international alliances that contributed to the spread of war after 1914.”

School of Thought #3: Interests of Individual Nations

Whatever else may have triggered World War I, it must be remembered that nations do not send their sons to die on the battlefield simply because they have signed onto alliances. Nations uphold or ignore alliances based on their own self-interests. To be sure, each of the combatants believed they had interests that had to be protected and pursued and therefore something to be gained by going to war:

**Russia:** It saw itself as the Protector of the Slavs and claimed Austria-Hungary treated Serbs and other Slavic-speaking groups unfairly. Russia also sought ready access to the Mediterranean Sea, but this involved sailing through Ottoman territory. Therefore, it wished to territorially expand at the Ottomans’ expense.

**The Ottoman Empire:** It had been losing territory since the eighteenth-century and sought to preserve its integrity and great power status. This included territory it had previously lost in the Balkans. It feared an expanding Russia.

**Germany:** It shared history and culture with German-speaking Austria, which created a powerful bond between the two states. It also wanted to secure the Rhineland, with its important resources, and to ward off French desires to seek revenge for the loss of Alsace-Lorraine to Germany in 1871 as a result of the Franco-German War.

**Italy:** It wanted to strengthen its position as a world power and gain more colonies. Italy switched its alliance from the Central Powers to the Allied Powers in 1915 on promises of getting additional territory in Europe and colonies abroad.

**France:** It looked upon Germany as an aggressor and wished to get back the territories it had lost to that power following the Franco-German War of 1870-71.

**Serbia:** It wanted to bring all Serbs in the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires into the Kingdom of Serbia. This was the idea of Pan-Slavism.

If these nations were not motivated by these interests, would the other factors have been sufficient to drag them into war?
**School of Thought #4: Arms Buildup**

The *Triple Alliance* [*Germany, Austria, & Italy*] and *Triple Entente* [*France, Great Britain, & Russia*] were supposed to be peace-keeping alliances, designed as deterrents to prevent any power from ganging up on any of the others. A prospective aggressor would know that if it declared war against any member of the opposing alliance, all members of that alliance would come to the attacked member's defense. While the system of alliances aimed to keep the peace, however, the opposing members were plotting against each other. This was accompanied by a buildup of arms sometimes described as a powder-keg. If the army and navy stockpiles had not existed, both alliances would have needed at least a year to mobilize [to assemble and prepare for war] and build defenses. A year might have been enough time to make them stop and select a more reasonable course. Even today, those who demand reduction of armaments in the world use the same argument.

An overwhelming attitude of *militarism* pervaded most European nations in the years leading up to the outbreak of war. Militarism is not just an arms race, but also a government's attitude of mind, seeing war as a valid means of foreign policy.

All the countries of Europe built up their armies and navies. In 1914, their armed forces, most of the troops being conscripted, stood like this:

- Germany: 2,200,000 soldiers, 97 warships
- Austria-Hungary: 810,000 soldiers, 28 warships
- Italy: 750,000 soldiers, 36 warships
- France: 1,125,000 soldiers, 62 warships
- Russia: 1,200,000 soldiers, 30 warships
- Great Britain: 711,000 soldiers, 185 warships

As one country increased its armies, so all the others felt obliged to increase their armed forces to keep the “balance of power.”

It is important to realize that, although in 1914 the German army was the biggest and best in the world, the Russian army was growing the fastest and the German generals worried that, in a few years time, they would not be able to defeat Russia so easily.

Britain and Germany clashed over the size of their navies. In 1900, Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany began to build up the German navy, announcing he wanted Germans to sail all over the world and take for Germany “a place in the sun.” After 1906, he began to build numbers of the new large *dreadnought* battleships [see image at right], which were more powerful than any other ships. This German naval buildup was only prompted *after* Britain had already begun construction of these super battleships known as *dreadnoughts*. The British determination to retain naval superiority had stimulated the Germans to build their own flotilla of dreadnoughts.