WORLD WAR I PART 2 OF 9 · AGES 11–16

CAUSES OF WORLD WAR I

Four long-term causes, remembered as MAIN, built up tension for years. A murder in Sarajevo set it off.

Militarism

Great powers built huge conscript armies and planned for a quick war. Britain launched HMS Dreadnought in 1906, and a naval race with Germany followed.

Alliances

Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy formed the Triple Alliance. France and Russia allied, and Britain's deals with them in 1904 and 1907 made the Triple Entente.

Imperialism

Britain and France ruled vast empires. Germany, united only in 1871, wanted colonies too, and crises over Morocco in 1905 and 1911 deepened the rivalry.

Nationalism

Serbia hoped to unite the South Slavs, which threatened Austria-Hungary. Austria-Hungary's annexation of Bosnia in 1908 angered Serbs.

The trigger: Sarajevo, 28 June 1914

Gavrilo Princip, a 19-year-old Bosnian Serb nationalist, shot Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to Austria-Hungary's throne, and his wife Sophie.

The July Crisis

Germany promised support on 5 July. Austria-Hungary sent Serbia an ultimatum on 23 July and declared war on 28 July. Russia mobilised to back Serbia.

Belgium and Britain

Germany declared war on Russia and France and invaded neutral Belgium. Britain, a guarantor of Belgium since 1839, declared war on 4 August.

Not an accident

No single cause made war certain, and earlier crises had been settled peacefully. Leaders in several capitals made choices in 1914. Historians still debate how far each one was to blame.

NEXT IN THE SERIES
3. World War I Timeline

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