Factors that Lead to the Great War - Nationalism

The British Empire was an important source of nationalism

Nationalism is an extreme form of patriotism and loyalty to one's country.

Nationalists place the interests of their own country above the interests of other countries. Nationalism was prevalent in early 20th century Europe and was a significant cause of World War I. Most pre-war Europeans believed in the cultural, economic and military supremacy of their nation.

Their attitudes and overconfidence were fuelled by things like jingoistic press reporting. The pages of newspapers were often packed with nationalist rhetoric and inflammatory stories or rumours about rival nations. Nationalism could also be found in other aspects of popular culture, including literature, music and theatre. Royals, politicians and diplomats did little to deflate nationalism – and some actively contributed to it with provocative remarks and rhetoric.

Nationalism gave citizens excessive confidence in their nation, their governments and their military strength. It assured them that their country was fair, righteous and without blame. In contrast, nationalist ideas demonised rival nations, caricaturing them as aggressive, scheming, deceitful, backward or uncivilised. It convinced many citizens their nation was being threatened by the plotting, scheming and hungry imperialism of its rivals. Nationalist and militarist rhetoric assured people that if war erupted, their nation would emerge victorious. In concert with its brothers, imperialism and militarism, nationalism contributed to a mass delusion that made a European war seem both necessary and winnable.

"A new and aggressive nationalism, different from its predecessors, emerged in Europe at the end of the 19th century… The new nationalism engaged the fierce us/them group emotions – loyalty inwards, aggression outwards – that characterise human relations at simpler sociological levels, like the family or the tribe. What was new was attaching these passions to the nation… In its outward-looking dimension, the new nationalism was fully a movement of the 'age of imperialism' – of the 'great game', the 'scramble for Africa', the enterprise of great powers."

Lawrence Rosenthal, historian

Europe's nationalism and its indifference to war can be explained. Aside from the Crimean War (1853-56) and the Franco-Prussian War (1870-71), the 1800s were a

century of comparative peace for Europe. Citizens of England, France and Germany had grown accustomed to colonial wars. These conflicts were fought against undeveloped and under-equipped opponents in far away places, and were mostly brief and victorious. With the exception of France, which was defeated by the Prussians in 1871, none of Europe's Great Powers had experienced a significant military defeat for more than half a century. This indifference to war, along with the arms race, contributed to a growing delusion of invincibility. Britons believed their naval power, backed by the economic might of the British Empire, would give them the upper hand in any war.

The Germans placed great faith in Prussian military efficiency, their industrial base, their growth in armaments and their expanding fleet of battleships and U-boats (submarines). In the event of a war, the German high command had supreme confidence in the Schlieffen Plan, a preemptive military strategy designed to win a war against Germany's eastern and western neighbours (Russia and France). Within Russia, the tsar believed his throne and empire were protected by God – as well as Russia's massive standing army of 1.5 million men, Europe's largest peacetime land force. Russia's commanders believed its enormous population gave it the upper hand over the much smaller nations of western Europe. The French placed their faith in a wall of concrete fortresses and defences running the length of their eastern border, capable of deterring and withstanding any German attack.
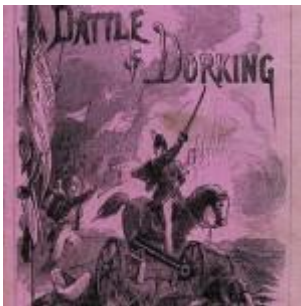
The cover of The Battle of Dorking, a typical example of anti-German invasion fiction

By the late 1800s some European powers had grown almost drunk with patriotism and nationalism – not without some cause. Britain, to focus on one example, had enjoyed two centuries of imperial, commercial and naval dominance, her empire spanning one quarter of the globe. The lyrics of a popular patriotic song, *Rule, Britannia!*, trumpeted that "Britons never never will be slaves".

London had spent the 19th century advancing her imperial and commercial interests and avoiding wars – however the unification of Germany, the speed of German armament and the bellicosity of Kaiser Wilhelm II caused concern among British nationalists. England's 'penny press' – cheap serialised novels, essays and short stories – fuelled foreign rivalries by publishing incredible fictions about foreign intrigues, espionage, future war and invasion.

The Battle of Dorking (1871), one of the best known examples of 'invasion literature', was a wild tale about an invasion of England by German forces. By 1910 a Londoner could buy dozens of tawdry novellas, each gamely warning of German, Russian or French aggression, perpetrated against England or her interests. This invasion literature often employed racial stereotyping or innuendo: the German was painted

as cold, cruel and calculating, the Russian was an uncultured barbarian, the Frenchman was a leisure-seeking layabout, the Chinese were a race of murderous opium-smoking savages. Penny novelists, cartoonists and satirists mocked the rulers of these countries. Two of the most popular targets were the German Kaiser and the Russian Tsar, who were both ridiculed for their arrogance, excessive ambition or megalomania.

A German cartoon ridiculing British imperial growth

German nationalism and xenophobia was no less intense, though it came from different origins. Unlike Britain, Germany was a comparatively young nation, formed in 1871 through the unification of 26 German-speaking states and territories. German nationalism or 'Pan-Germanism' was the political glue that bound these states together. The leaders of post-1871 Germany relied on nationalist sentiment to consolidate and strengthen the new nation and to gain public support. German culture – from the poetry of Goethe to the music of Richard Wagner – was promoted and celebrated. German nationalism was backed by German militarism; the state of the nation was defined and reflected by the strength of its military forces. The new kaiser, Wilhelm II, was the personification of this new Germany. Both the kaiser and his nation were young, nationalistic, obsessed with military power and imperial expansion. The kaiser was proud of Germany's achievements but nervous about its future; he was envious of other powers and desperate for national success. In the kaiser's mind, the main obstacle to German expansion was Britain. Wilhelm envied Britain's vast empire and enormous naval power – but he thought the British avaricious and hypocritical. The British government oversaw the world's largest empire yet maneuvered against German colonial expansion in Africa and Asia. The British became a popular target in the pre-war German press, where Britain was painted as expansionist, selfish, greedy and obsessed with money. Anti-British sentiment intensified during the Boer War of 1899-1902, Britain's war against farmer-settlers for control of South Africa.

Nationalism was also emerging in distant colonies. This cartoon depicts rising Chinese nationalism

As the Great Powers beat their chests and filled their people with a sense of righteousness and superiority, another form of nationalism was on the rise in southern Europe. This nationalism was not about supremacy or military power – but the right of ethnic groups to independence, autonomy and self government. With the world divided into large empires and spheres of influence, many different regions, races and religious groups wanted freedom from their imperial masters. In Russia, more than 80 ethnic groups in eastern Europe and Asia were forced to speak the Russian language, worship the Russian tsar and practice the Russian Orthodox religion. For much of the 19th century China had been 'carved up' and economically exploited by European powers; resentful Chinese formed secret and exiled nationalist groups to rid their country of foreign influence. Nationalist groups contributed to the weakening of the Ottoman Empire in eastern Europe, by seeking to throw off Muslim rule.

No nationalist movement had a greater impact in the outbreak of war than Slavic groups in the Balkans. Pan-Slavism, the belief that the Slavic peoples of eastern Europe should have their own nation, was a powerful force in the region. Slavic nationalism was strongest in Serbia, where it had risen significantly in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Pan-Slavism was particularly opposed to the Austro-Hungarian Empire and its control and influence over the region. Aggravated by Vienna's annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, young Serbs joined radical nationalist groups like the 'Black Hand' (*Crna Ruka*). These groups hoped to drive Austria-Hungary from the Balkans and establish a 'Greater Serbia', a unified state for all Slavic people. It was this pan-Slavic nationalism that inspired the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo in June 1914, an event that led directly to the outbreak of World War I.

5 key points

1. Nationalism was an intense form of patriotism. Those with nationalist tendencies celebrated the culture and achievements of their own country and placed its interests above those of other nations.
2. Pre-war nationalism was fuelled by wars, imperial conquests and rivalry, political rhetoric, newspapers and popular culture, such as 'invasion literature' written by penny press novelists.
3. British nationalism was fuelled by a century of comparative peace and prosperity. The British Empire had flourished and expanded, its naval strength had grown and Britons had known only colonial wars.
4. German nationalism was a new phenomenon, emerging from the unification of Germany in 1871. It became fascinated with German imperial expansion (securing Germany's 'place in the sun') and resentful of the British and their empire.
5. Rising nationalism was also a factor in the Balkans, where Slavic Serbs and others sought independence and autonomy from the political domination of Austria-Hungary.

National Rivalries - *Two Kinds of Nationalism*

There were two kinds of nationalism in 19th Century Europe:
(i) the desire of subject peoples for independence -
It led to a series of national struggles for independence among the Balkan peoples.
Other powers got involved and caused much instability.
(ii) the desire of independent nations for dominance and prestige –

As the powers try to dominate each other in Europe, their rivalries may be regarded as one of the causes of the First World War.

Nationalism in Germany

Germany was united in 1871 as a result of the Franco-Prussian War, and she rapidly became the strongest economic and military power in Europe. From 1871 to 1890, Germany wanted to preserve her hegemony in Europe by forming a series of peaceful alliances with other powers. After 1890, Germany was more aggressive. She wanted to build up her influence in every part of the world. German foreign policy in these years was best expressed by the term 'Weltpolitik' (World Politics). Because German ambitions were extended to many parts of the globe, Germany came into serious conflicts with all other major powers of Europe (except Austria-Hungary) from 1890 to 1914.

Nationalism in Italy

Italy was unified in 1870. She was barely powerful enough to be counted as a great power. Her parliamentary system was corrupt and inefficient. Her industrial progress was slow. But Italy had great territorial ambitions. She wanted Tunis and Tripoli in northern Africa. This brought her into conflicts with France because Tunis was adjacent to the French colony, Algeria, and was long regarded by France as French sphere of influence. Italy also wanted Italia Irredenta--Trieste, Trentio and Tyrol. Although the majority of the people in these places were Italians, they were kept under the rule of the Dual Monarchy . Thus Italy came into serious conflicts with Austria-Hungary.

Nationalism in Austria-Hungary

Austria-Hungary was established as the Dual Monarchy in 1867. The Dual Monarchy ruled over a large empire consisting of many nationalities, but only the Austrians (racially they were German) and the Hungarians had the right to rule. The other nationalities Czechs, Slovaks, Serbs, Croats, Rumanians and Poles resented their loss of political freedom. They desired for political independence. Thus the policy of the Dual Monarchy was to suppress the nationalist movements both inside and outside the empire. The particular object of the Dual Monarchy was to gain political

control over the Balkan Peninsula, where nationalist movements were rife and were always giving encouragement to the nationalist movements within the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The centre of the nationalist movements in the Balkans was Serbia. Serbia always hoped to unite with the Serbs in the Austro-Hungarian Empire so as to create a large Serbian state. Therefore the first enemy of Austria-Hungary from 1871 to 1914 was Serbia. Besides Serbia, Austria-Hungary also hated Russia because Russia, being a Slav country, always backed up Serbia in any Austro-Serbian disputes.

Nationalism in Russia

Russia was the largest and most populous country in Europe. It extended from the shores of the Arctic Ocean to those of the Black Sea and from the Baltic Sea eastwards to the Pacific Ocean. Two thirds of her people were Slavs. She was still territorially ambitious. She wanted to expand in all directions. In 1870, Russia broke the Treaty of Paris (see below) and renewed her aggression in the Balkans. Thus, her territorial ambitions clashed with the interests of Austria-Hungary and Britain. However, Russia did not retreat. Being a 'landlocked' state, she wanted to acquire warm water ports in the Balkans (e.g. Constantinople). Moreover, as most of the Balkan peoples were of the Slavic race, Russia could claim to be the protector of her brother races in her expansion.
Note: Treaty of Paris and Russia
In 1856, Russia was defeated by Britain and France in the Crimean War. She was forced to sign the Treaty of Paris, which stopped her expansion into the Balkans from 1856 to 1870. Britain wanted to establish her influence in the Balkans because the Balkan area borders the Mediterranean Sea. If Russia controlled the Balkan area, British naval power and trade in the Mediterranean Sea would be threatened.

Nationalism in France

France had been the dominant power in Europe for centuries. Napoleon I and Napoleon III had attempted to dominate Europe. In 1871, France was defeated by Prussia, and as a consequence lost two of her provinces: Alsace and Lorraine. She also needed to pay heavy indemnities.

From 1871 onwards, France's greatest ambition was to recover Alsace and Lorraine from Germany. She also wanted to prevent another defeat by Germany, to recover her national prestige by acquiring overseas colonies (e.g. Morocco) and to make diplomatic alliances with other important powers in Europe.

Nationalism in Britain

In 1870 Britain was the most industrially advanced country in Europe. She also possessed the largest overseas empire and the largest navy in the world. She did not want to trouble herself with the continental affairs of Europe. Her main concern was to preserve her overseas empire and her overseas trade by maintaining a large navy. Before 1890, her chief enemies were France and Russia. The colonial interests of France often clashed with those of Britain . (Britain and France had colonial rivalries in Asia and Africa--for example, India, Burma, Thailand, Egypt.)

Russia's interest in the Balkan area also alarmed Britain, as British naval interests in the Mediterranean Sea would be immediately threatened. After 1890, as Germany went on increasing her naval strength and threatened British naval supremacy and the British overseas interests, she became Britain's chief enemy.