

Factors Leading to World War One – Alliances & Treaties

Some individuals seem to feel a sense of satisfaction through identifying the main culprit to blame for starting the Great War of 1914 -1918. Inevitably in those situations the German nation is accorded that dubious honour.

However, a study of the multiple events and issues that occurred in the forty years leading up to 1914 might lead one to conclude the apportionment of blame is not a simple 'black & white' matter and that in fact many factors lead to the world's first global conflict.

This article will attempt to show that in fact each of the major belligerent nations of Europe had its own 'national' objectives that conflicted with those of other countries, and each of them thereby played a role in building the explosive situation that was ignited at Sarajevo on 28th June 1914.

A summary of the main strands to be covered are as follows:

- Prior to 1914 a number of small Balkan countries within the **Austro-Hungarian Empire** (particularly Serbia) harboured strong desires for 'self determination' and 'national independence'.

With the assassination of the Archduke Ferdinand, Austria-Hungary took this as an opportunity to impose its will upon Serbia and crush those sentiments.

- In the decade before the war the **German nation** was expressing a desire for greater power and international influence, which sparked a naval arms race with Britain, who responded by building new and bigger warships.
- Following their disastrous defeat at the hands of the Prussians in 1871, the **French** maintained strong feelings for revenge against Germany, encapsulated by their desire to reclaim their lost territories of Alsace & Lorraine.
- Following their drubbing at the hands of the Japanese in 1905, **Tsarist Russia** had subsequently experienced years of civil strife – the Tsarist Government was therefore keen to restore some semblance of national prestige.
- In the second half of the 19th Century **Great Britain** had adopted a policy of 'splendid isolation' whereby she opted to stay right out of European affairs and instead attend to the control of her many colonies around the world, and particularly India.

However in the decade before the out-break of the War Britain again became more interested in events on the European continent, in response to the build up of the German Navy and that nation's colonial aspirations.

However, in the years leading up to the declaration of War Britain adopted a *dithering foreign policy* whereby neither France nor Germany really knew for certain whether she would / or would not actually go to war, nor on who she would side with.

What Happened at Sarajevo on 28th June 1914

The archduke Ferdinand and his wife Sophie travelled to Sarajevo in June 1914 to inspect the imperial armed forces in Bosnia and Herzegovina. These were former Ottoman territories in the turbulent Balkan region that were annexed by Austria-Hungary in 1908, just six years earlier, to the indignation of Serbian nationalists, who believed they should have become part of the newly independent and ambitious Serbian nation.

The date scheduled for the archduke's visit, June 28, coincided with the anniversary of the First Battle of Kosovo in 1389, which was a day of great significance to Serbian nationalists, and one on which they could be expected to take exception to a demonstration of the Austrian imperial presence in Bosnia.

And so it was that on that day as Franz Ferdinand and Sophie were touring Sarajevo in an open car, with surprisingly little security, they were shot at point-blank range by 19-year-old student and activist Gavrilo Princip.

The reaction of the government of Austria-Hungary's to the death of their heir was three weeks in coming. But only a matter of days after it did come, the dominoes fell one by one and the nations of Europe went to war.

The great Prussian statesman Otto von Bismarck, the man most responsible for the unification of Germany in 1871, was quoted as saying at the end of his life that "*One day the great European War will come out of some damned foolish thing in the Balkans.*" How prescient was he?

To understand how the Great War came about we will first consider key events in Europe in the years leading up to the event of that day.

After that, we will briefly study the chain reaction of diplomatic events that followed after Gavrilo Princip pulled the trigger on that 28th day of June 1914.

The BBC three part series docudrama *37 Days* is recommended pre course viewing as it provides an excellent portrayal of the to and fro diplomatic exchanges and communications that took place during the period between the shooting of the Archduke and the declaration of war.

Alliances & Treaties in Europe Before 28th June 1914

During the forty or so years throughout Europe prior to 1914 the various independent nations entered a series of treaties and alliances which each other. Eventually these became so mixed up that they resembled a bowl of spaghetti!

Karl von Bismarck was probably the initial architect of **Alliance system**.

Once he had unified the various states to form the German nation in 1870, Bismarck felt he had achieved his life objective, and his plans for expansion were at an end.

Having secured his aim for a unified Germany, his chief desire then was to maintain its stability. Bismarck was acutely aware that the French were itching to revenge their 1870 defeat at the earliest opportunity, and he recognised that the loss of Alsace and Lorraine to Prussia would prove to be a lasting sore for the French.

In order to create stability he therefore set about building a number on inter- nation *alliances and treaties* with the purpose of protecting Germany from potentially threatening nations.

The most critical and enduring Alliance created by Bismarck was the 1879 Dual Alliance with Austria- Hungary, wherein a clause **promised ‘aid to each other in the event of an attack by Russia, or if Russia aided another power at war with either Germany or Austria-Hungary’**.

This alliance, unlike many others, endured until war in 1914. It was this clause cited above that Austria-Hungary invoked in calling Germany to her aid against Russian support for Serbia (who in turn was protected by a treaty with Russia).

The Triple Alliance

Two years after Germany and Austria-Hungary concluded their agreement, Italy was brought into the fold with the signing of the Triple Alliance in 1881.

Under the provisions of this treaty, Germany and Austria-Hungary promised to assist Italy if she were attacked by France, and vice versa: Italy was bound to aid Germany or Austria-Hungary if **France declared war against either**.

(Ironically, in August 1914 when war broke out, Italy asserted she was not bound to support Germany because **Germany had in fact declared war against France!**)

Franco-Russian Agreements

In 1891 Russia allied itself with France. Both powers agreed to consult with the other should either find itself at war with any other nation, or if indeed the stability of Europe was threatened.

This rather loosely worded agreement was solidified in 1892 with the Franco-Russian Military Convention, aimed specifically at counteracting the potential threat posed by the Triple Alliance of Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy.

In short, should France or Russia be attacked by one of the Triple Alliance signatories - or even should a Triple Alliance power **mobilise** against either, the other power would provide military assistance.

A Secret Franco-Italian Alliance

In the event the Triple Alliance was essentially meaningless, for Italy subsequently negotiated a secret treaty with France, under which Italy would remain neutral should Germany attack France - which in the event transpired.

In 1914 Italy declared that Germany's war against France was an 'aggressive' one and so entitled Italy to claim neutrality. A year later, in 1915, Italy did enter the First World War, as an ally of Britain, France and Russia.

Austria-Hungary signed an alliance with Romania in 1883, negotiated by Germany, although in the event Romania - after starting World War One as a neutral - eventually joined in with the Allies; as such Austria-Hungary's treaty with Romania was of no actual significance.

Britain's Emergence from Splendid Isolation

Meanwhile, Britain was awaking to the emergence of Germany as a great European power - and a colonial power at that. Kaiser Wilhelm's successor, Wilhelm II, proved far more ambitious in establishing "a place in the sun" for Germany. With the effective dismissal of Bismarck the new Kaiser was determined to establish Germany as a great colonial power in the Pacific and in Africa.

Wilhelm, encouraged by naval minister Tirpitz, embarked upon a massive shipbuilding exercise intended to produce a naval fleet the equal of Britain's, unarguably by far and away the world's largest.

Britain, at that time the greatest naval power in the world, was wary. In 1902, Britain agreed a military alliance with Japan, aimed squarely at limiting German colonial gains in the east.

She also responded by commissioning a build-up in her own naval strength, determined to outstrip Germany. By the time war was declared in 1914 Germany could muster just 29 battleships compared to Britain's 49.

Basically what Germany's naval and colonial ambitions succeeded in doing was to pull Britain into the European alliance system - and, it has been argued, brought war that much closer.

Cordial Agreements: Britain, France - and Russia

In 1904 Britain signed the **Entente Cordiale** with France, in an agreement that finally resolved their leftover colonial squabbles. More significantly, *although it did not commit either to the other's military aid in time of war*, it did offer closer diplomatic co-operation generally.

Three years on, in 1907, Russia formed what became known as the Triple Entente (which lasted until World War One) by signing an agreement with Britain, the **Anglo-Russian Entente**.

In combination these two agreements formed the three-way alliance that lasted and effectively bound each to the other right up till the outbreak of world war just seven years later.

Again, although the two Entente agreements were not militarily binding in any way, they did place a "moral obligation" upon the signatories to aid each other in time of war.

It was chiefly this moral obligation that drew Britain into the war in defence of France, although the British pretext was actually the terms of the largely forgotten **1839 Treaty of London** that committed the British to defend **Belgian neutrality**.

Because this 70+ year treaty was so dated, the Germans considered that Britain should just have discarded it as "*a scrap of paper*" that in the context of 1914 should have been ignored, thereby allowing them to invade Belgium with impunity.

In 1912 Britain and France did however conclude a military agreement, the **Anglo-French Naval Convention**, which promised British protection of France's Channel coastline from German naval attack, while the French navy undertook to defend the Suez Canal.

The Tangle of Alliances

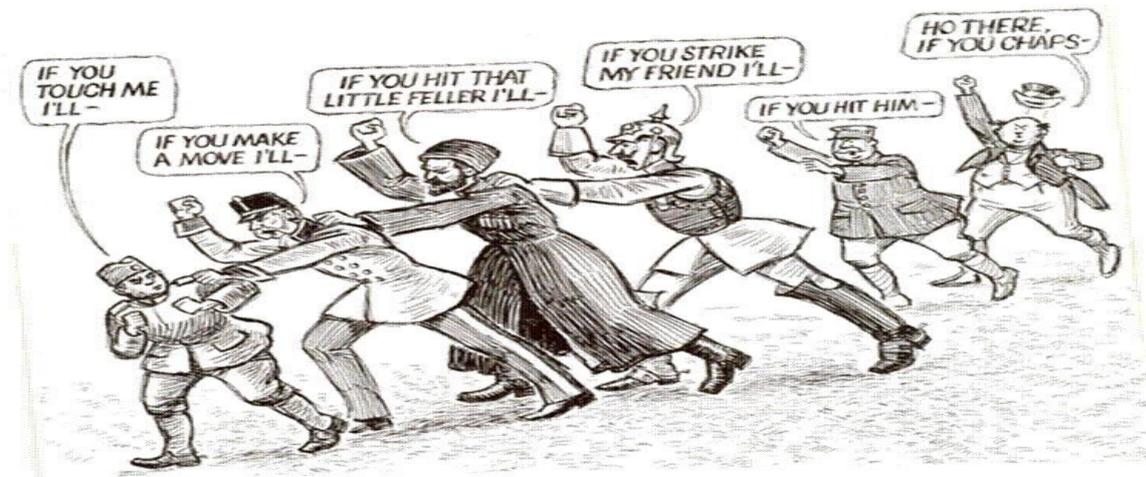
By 1914 the mechanics of this mish-mash of existing treaties and alliances was such that a relatively minor incident would inevitably trigger one of the numerous pre-conditions set out in those multiple agreements and catapult Europe's major nations to war.

The immediate and intended consequences of what happened on 28th June 1914 was a strictly limited war between Austria- Hungary and Serbia.

However the activation of terms in long standing treaties and alliances that were in place rapidly caused what was a relatively minor incident to escalate into a conflict of great magnitude that quickly became uncontrollable.

One which was way beyond the expectations of the political and military leaders of any of the warring the nations involved.

Unfolding Events in Europe After 28th June 1914



The events of July and early August 1914 are a classic case of "one thing led to another" - otherwise known as the treaty alliance system.

Austria-Hungary's Reaction

Austria-Hungary's reaction to the death of their heir (who was in any case not greatly beloved by the Emperor, Franz Josef, or his government) was three weeks in coming. Arguing that the Serbian government was implicated in the machinations of the Black Hand (whether she was or not remains unclear, but it appears unlikely), the Austro-Hungarians opted to take the opportunity to stamp its authority upon the Serbians, crushing the nationalist movement there and cementing Austria-Hungary's influence in the Balkans.

It did so by issuing an **ultimatum to Serbia** which, in the extent of its demand that the assassins be brought to justice Austria-Hungary effectively nullified Serbia's sovereignty.

Austria-Hungary's intention and expectation was that Serbia would reject the remarkably severe terms of the ultimatum, thereby giving her a pretext for launching a limited war against Serbia.

While the Austrian-Hungarian government was aware that Serbia had a treaty arrangement with Russia, she gambled that Russia would not be drawn into the local conflict to any great extent other than via words of diplomatic protest. The Austrian- Hungarians felt confident in this bluff because both sides well knew that Germany stood ready to support them in the event of war with Russia.

The Falling of the Dominoes

So then, we have the following remarkable sequence of events that led inexorably to the 'Great War' - a name that had been touted even before the coming of the conflict.

- **Austria-Hungary**, unsatisfied with Serbia's response to her ultimatum which in the event was almost entirely placatory: however her jibbing over a couple of minor clauses gave Austria-Hungary her sought-after 'cassis belli' and she declared war on Serbia on 28 July 1914.
- **Russia**, bound by treaty to Serbia, announced **mobilisation** of its vast army in her defence, a slow process that would take around six weeks to complete.
- **Germany**, allied to Austria-Hungary by treaty, viewed the Russian *mobilisation as an 'act of war'* against Austria-Hungary, and immediately proceeded to declare war on Russia on **1 August**.
- **France**, bound by treaty to Russia, found itself at war against Germany and, by extension, with Austria-Hungary. Germany declared war against France on **3 August**, and immediately proceeded to invade Belgium as part of its strategic Schlieffen Plan.
- **Britain**, allied to France by a more loosely worded treaty which only placed a "moral obligation" upon her to defend France, declared war against Germany on 4 August. Her reason for entering the conflict lay in another direction: she was obligated to defend neutral Belgium by the terms of a 75-year old treaty. Like France, she was by extension also at war with Austria-Hungary.
- With Britain's entry into the war, her colonies and dominions abroad (Australia, Canada, India, New Zealand and the Union of South Africa) **immediately and without question** offered military and material assistance.
- **United States** President Woodrow Wilson *declared a U.S. policy of absolute neutrality*, an official stance that would last until 1917.
- **Japan**, honouring a military agreement with Britain, declared war on Germany on 23 August 1914.
- **Italy**, although allied to both Germany and Austria-Hungary, was able to avoid entering the fray by citing a clause enabling it to evade its obligations to both. In short, Italy was committed to defend Germany and Austria-Hungary only in the event of a 'defensive' war; arguing that their actions were 'offensive' she declared instead a policy of neutrality. The following year, in May 1915, she finally joined the conflict by siding with the Allies against her two former allies.

British Dithering

Some people suggest that Germany would have backed away from war had Britain declared her intentions sooner. Believing that Britain would stay out of the coming conflict, and would limit herself to diplomatic protests - after all, Britain was under no strict military obligation to France - Germany, and Austria-Hungary, proceeded under the belief that war would be fought solely with France and Russia.

The British Government, and its Foreign Minister, Sir Edward Grey, attempted to mediate throughout July, reserving at all times its right to remain aloof from the dispute. It was only as the war began that the British position solidified into support for, ostensibly, Belgium.

Hence the oft-levelled criticism that had Britain come out clearly on the side of Belgium and France earlier in July, war would have been avoided: Germany would have effectively instructed Austria-Hungary to settle with Serbia, especially given the latter's willingness to co-operate with Austria-Hungary.

Whether this would have transpired given the German war machine's determination for war is of course unknown.

A Family Affair

The First World War has sometimes been labelled, with reason, "**a family affair**". This is derived from the reality that many of the European monarchies – some of which fell during the war (including those of Russia, Germany and Austria-Hungary) - were inter-related.

The British monarch George V's predecessor, Edward VII, was the German Kaiser's uncle and, via his wife's sister, uncle of the Russian Tsar as well. His niece, Alexandra, was the Tsar's wife. Edward's daughter, Maud, was the Norwegian Queen, and his niece, Ena, Queen of Spain; Marie, a further niece, was to become Queen of Romania.

Despite these familial relations - nine Kings attended Edward's funeral - European politics was all about power and influence, of protection and encirclement. Thus the tangled web of alliances which sprung up in the wake of the rise of the newly united German Empire in 1871.