

Main causes of World War 1

Today's Europe contains over 30 countries or *nation-states*, each with distinct borders, political systems, and cultures. Nation-states are a historically recent development. They have:

- *a defined geographic territory*
- *cultural purpose* — uniting their citizens with a national identity
- *political purpose* — governing themselves with their own governmental structure

As fixed as it may look today, Europe's map is still changing. Over the past centuries, it has evolved and changed like no other continent. Across the centuries, the map of Europe has been in constant flux. Tribes have conquered neighbours, then been conquered in turn. Empires and kingdoms have come and gone. Nation-states have risen and fallen.

Survival strategies

Over the 18th and 19th centuries, as modern Europe began taking shape, the newly evolving nation-states competed intensely for power and prestige. In this struggle, they came to rely on four key strategies: militarism, alliances, imperialism, and nationalism. Modern historians use the acronym MAIN to describe this set of strategies.

Militarism

Militarism is the belief that war is a valid way to handle foreign policy and that a nation-state needs a strong military force to defend or promote its interests. Militaristic countries focus their activities on “war readiness.” They spend significant tax money to maintain a large military force at all times. Their education and economic systems are geared toward the possibility, even the probability, of war. Even in times of peace, militaristic states build up their stock of weapons to try and ensure they can win any war that may erupt. At the end of the 19th century, most European nations were militaristic.

Alliances

On a continent of militaristic neighbours, having strong allies was seen as a crucial defence strategy that could reduce the chance of being attacked. This was especially true for smaller, weaker nations. By the end of the 19th century, Europe was a spider's web of counterbalancing military alliances. These were often formalized through mutual-defence treaties which stipulated that if one ally was attacked, other allies would come to its aid. Alliances were usually temporary and changeable, and one day's ally often became the next day's enemy.

Imperialism

In the 18th and 19th centuries, most European countries developed political and/or economic empires either inside or outside of Europe. Great Britain, for instance, had an imperial empire that spanned the globe, with distant colonies (like Canada) trading raw resources for manufactured goods from England. Competition for colonies was intense, especially after the unifications of Germany and Italy. Those two new nation-states wanted to build their own colonial empires. These empires depended on powerful militaries to acquire and maintain their territories.

Nationalism

Nationalism is more than the sense of pride in one's nation. Particularly in 19th-century Europe, it was the belief that distinct ethnic groups were entitled to their own nation-state. This potent political force had and was still reshaping Europe, helping to unify nation-states like Germany and Italy, but fragmenting multi-ethnic empires like Austria-Hungary. Nationalist tensions were especially high in the Balkans, where Serbs, Croats, and Bosnians had been fighting for independence from Austria-Hungary for many decades. It was a powder keg waiting to explode.