

Underlying causes of the First World War

Investigate the alliances in Europe. Each country's status in 1914 and how they were applying the MAIN strategies discussed earlier (Militarism, Alliances, Imperialism, and Nationalism) is detailed here, beginning with the Triple Alliance.

Triple Alliance (1914)

- **Army:** 7.5 million troops
- **Air force:** 281 planes
- **Navy:** 142 boats

Italy

In 1914, the Kingdom of Italy was still a new nation. It had only been unified in 1861, after a number of wars for national independence.

The Kingdom was a parliamentary monarchy. The king, Victor Emmanuel III, had executive power, but he needed support from two houses of parliament to get things done.

Italy was not an industrial power, and a large proportion of its population was doing agricultural work.

- ***Military:*** Italy had 1.25 million people in their standing armies and reserves at the start of the war, and did not contribute any resources to the war effort right away.
- ***Allied with:*** Italy had joined the German/Austro-Hungarian alliance in 1882 because they feared attack from France. However, Italy had, in past years, been attacked by Austria-Hungary, had lost territories, and wanted them back. Italy sat between two opposing forces in 1914. They were part of the Triple Alliance when war broke out, but understood their position as one of defence rather than attack. Italy was also secretly negotiating with the opposing side and considering their options.
- ***Imperialism:*** Italy had a few colonies in Africa but, along their own northern border, they'd lost territories to the Austria-Hungary Empire. Italy wanted to regain those territories, win more, and protect itself from further invasion.
- ***Nationalism:*** Italy was united into a kingdom in 1870 amid turmoil. Although the Italian government had not been effective in creating a national spirit among the diverse regions of Italy, a National Association was formed in 1910.

Germany

In 1914, the German Reich or Empire was still one of the newest European states. It first became a united country in 1871, after a long war that had involved France.

Between 1871 and 1914, it had developed into a scientific and economic powerhouse with the second largest railway network in the world (after the United States).

Constitutionally, the Reich was a parliamentary democracy, but the hereditary Kaiser (Emperor), Wilhelm II, had come to dominate the government, particularly in foreign affairs and the military.

- ***Military:*** Germany was better prepared for war in 1914 than most nations. Starting in the mid-1880s, the government of Kaiser Wilhelm II devoted huge sums to building a modern army that could protect the state from France and Russia on either side. Much money had also been directed toward creating a navy that could rival Great Britain's, the world's most powerful naval force at the time. This became an arms race, with each country building ever larger and more powerful ships.
- ***Allied with:*** To protect itself from Russia, Germany set up a mutual defence treaty with the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1879. The treaty required both countries to come to the other's aid if attacked by Russia. If an attack came from another country (such as France), the ally could remain neutral. In 1882, Italy joined this alliance. The three also agreed that if Italy were attacked by France, the other two would come to Italy's assistance. This arrangement became known as the Triple Alliance.
- ***Imperialism:*** By the time Germany became a unified state, Great Britain and other European countries had well-established colonies around the world. The Kaiser wanted Germany to have the prestige and economic power that came from having colonies. This was part of his motivation in building a strong navy to create and hold what he called "a place in the sun." By 1914, Germany had scattered colonies in Africa and Asia, but was not an imperial power like Great Britain or France.
- ***Nationalism:*** From its unification as a state, the German Reich was nationalistic. Nationalistic fervour had been used to promote unification, particularly after Germany won parts of Alsace and Lorraine from France in 1871. Ethnically, the German Reich was over 90 percent Germanic, with the largest non-German ethnic group being Poles. The state had a "Germanization" policy that pressured all other groups to give up other ethnic identity.

Austria-Hungary

At its height, the Austro-Hungarian Empire was a major European power. By 1914, however, the empire was in decline. The government was divided, and there was internal strife between Austrians and Hungarians.

The empire also faced tensions in the Balkans, where it had forcibly annexed Bosnia and had ongoing tensions with Serbia.

The empire's autocratic Emperor-King, Franz Josef I, was ageing, and his heir, the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, was widely unpopular, especially in the Balkan countries.

- **Military:** During most of the 19th and early-20th centuries, Austria-Hungary was a 'great power' that maintained a very large army, but just a small navy and air force. The empire favoured an aggressive foreign policy and was willing to use military action to solve territorial disputes with their neighbours, particularly Serbia which it considered dangerous.
- **Allied with:** Fearing an attack from Russia in the east, Austria-Hungary formed the 'Dual Alliance' with the German Empire in 1879. This mutual defence agreement required each partner to protect the other in the event of an attack from Russia, but to remain neutral if the attack came from another country. This became the Triple Alliance when it included Italy in 1882.
- **Imperialism:** Unlike other European powers which had far-flung colonies, Austria-Hungary was a land-based, contiguous empire. The Empire's territory spread across modern Austria and Hungary, as well as into parts of Poland, Italy, Romania, Czechoslovakia, and down into the Balkans. At the time, it was the second largest state in Europe (after the Russian Empire).
- **Nationalism:** Austria-Hungary was a multicultural empire that included ten major ethnic groups. Apart from the majority of German-speaking Austrians and the Hungarians, the empire included Italians, Czechs, Poles, and several Slavic populations. Different official languages were used in different parts of the empire, but there were significant ethnic tensions, especially in the annexed Balkan states of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Having been independent, populations in those areas wanted their own nation states.

Triple Entente

- **Army:** 10.8 million troops
- **Air force:** 602 airplanes
- **Navy:** 824 boats

France

France was a democracy with an elected government. They'd had quite recent conflicts with Germany.

In 1870-71, when Germany was trying to become a unified country, France had gone to war to try to stop it. The Germans won the war easily, and took the area of Alsace-Lorraine from France. The French were still bitter about this territorial loss.

Raymond Poincaré was president of the Third French Republic at start of the First World War. He was wary of German militarism and had taken steps to reinforce the armed forces in France before the war began.

- **Military:** France was part of the trend toward militarism during this time. They'd been a great power in Europe since the early 1800s, but had begun to see their homeland, colonies, alliances, economy and status threatened by the unified power of their neighbours in Germany and Italy. Anticipating conflict prior to the start of World War I, they'd built up their military with significant numbers of well-armed soldiers, battleships, and aircraft. France was ready for war.
- **Allied with:** French President Poincaré had been prime minister in France just before World War I. He'd anticipated new threats from Germany and had taken decisive steps to strengthen alliances with Russia and Great Britain. He felt that war was coming and that strong alliances and strong borders were the best way to improve security.
- **Imperialism:** In the early 1900s, France was at the center of a great empire. They'd been a colonial power for more than one hundred years and had extensive colonies in Africa and Asia. Africa, for example, was 90 percent under European control, with Great Britain and France 'owning' most of the continent. It had come to the point where territorial gain by one European power meant loss of territory for another.
- **Nationalism:** The French had national pride. After all, they had been one of the dominant powers in Europe and around the world for more than a century. But their defeat by Germany in 1871 and the loss of two provinces - Alsace and Lorraine - had been humiliating, and the French were determined to prevent similar events from happening again. French leaders like Poincaré and Clemenceau had not forgiven Germany for this aggression and were prepared to defend their country before the war began.

Great Britain

In the 19th century, Great Britain was a dominant world power. By 1914, however, its economy was declining and being surpassed by Germany's.

The country was a constitutional monarchy with an elected parliament and prime minister, coupled with a hereditary but largely ceremonial king - George V (who was actually related to the German Kaiser and Russian Tsar).

- **Military:** In 1914, Great Britain had military power, with a standing army of almost a million soldiers and the largest navy in the world with the most powerful warships. The size of Great Britain's navy had increased as they built their huge empire and competed in a naval arms race with Germany.
- **Allied with:** In the early 1900s, Great Britain had practiced what it called "splendid isolation." They kept themselves isolated on their island and did not get involved in politics or military affairs in mainland Europe. Still, at one time or another, Great Britain had fought and also allied with almost every major European country. In 1914 they were allied with France and Russia as partners in the Triple Entente. Beyond that, Great Britain also had a treaty to protect Belgium if it were attacked, as well as a military pact with Japan.

- *Imperialism:* In the early 1900s, the British Empire was the largest ever seen. They had colonies around the globe, including Canada, Australia, South Africa, Hong Kong, and India. Its colonies brought Great Britain great economic benefits. In Great Britain, a large portion of the population thought the Empire was 'benevolent' - bringing civilization and culture to 'primitive' peoples. Many of the colonized and subjugated locals did not agree.
- *Nationalism:* At home, the British took tremendous pride in their empire and military power. Many British saw their success as proof of God's blessing. However, in colonies around the world, the British faced much dissent and rebellion.

Russian Empire

Russia was huge but, in some ways, not very progressive. Tsar Nicolas II of Russia was related to the King of Great Britain and Kaiser of Germany, but he was a weak ruler and had lost a war to Japan disastrously in 1904.

There was unrest among industry workers in Russia. From 1912 until the war, strikes and retaliation were frequent and sometimes violent.

- *Military:* In 1914, the Russian Army was the largest in the world, with nearly six million soldiers. However, their poor roads and railways made the deployment of soldiers and the transportation of equipment and provisions difficult and slow. Russia had the largest air force at the time but its navy was relatively small.
- *Allied with:* Russian allied with France and then with Great Britain to form the Triple Entente. Russia had an interest in 'liberating' the Balkan states, including Serbia, from the Ottoman Empire, and had allied with Serbia. Austria-Hungary did not support this. They wanted to limit Russia's influence in the Balkans and had interests of their own in that region. Russia was therefore at odds with the Austria-Hungarian–German alliance.
- *Imperialism:* The Russian Empire was one of the largest in history, stretching over three continents. At the beginning of the 19th century, it extended from the Arctic Ocean to the Black Sea, from the Baltic Sea on the west to the Pacific Ocean, and (until 1867) into Alaska on the east. Russia wanted to liberate the Balkans from the Ottoman Empire (and form a 'Pan-slavic' partnership). There had been conflict between the two empires over this issue.
- *Nationalism:* Most of Russia's 166 million population were Slavs, but there were dozens of other nationalities. Some groups wanted regional autonomy and this caused political conflict around the empire. The traditional class system also separated Russians into 'aristocracy' and 'peasants.' These sides were also in conflict. Ethnic and class inequality were dividing Russia, and there was increasing pressure from within for reform.