

MAIN Causes of World War One

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. Keep reading to learn about each components:

Militarism

Alliances

Imperialism

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.

Image alt text: Strict lines of soldiers marching in rhythm in the street.

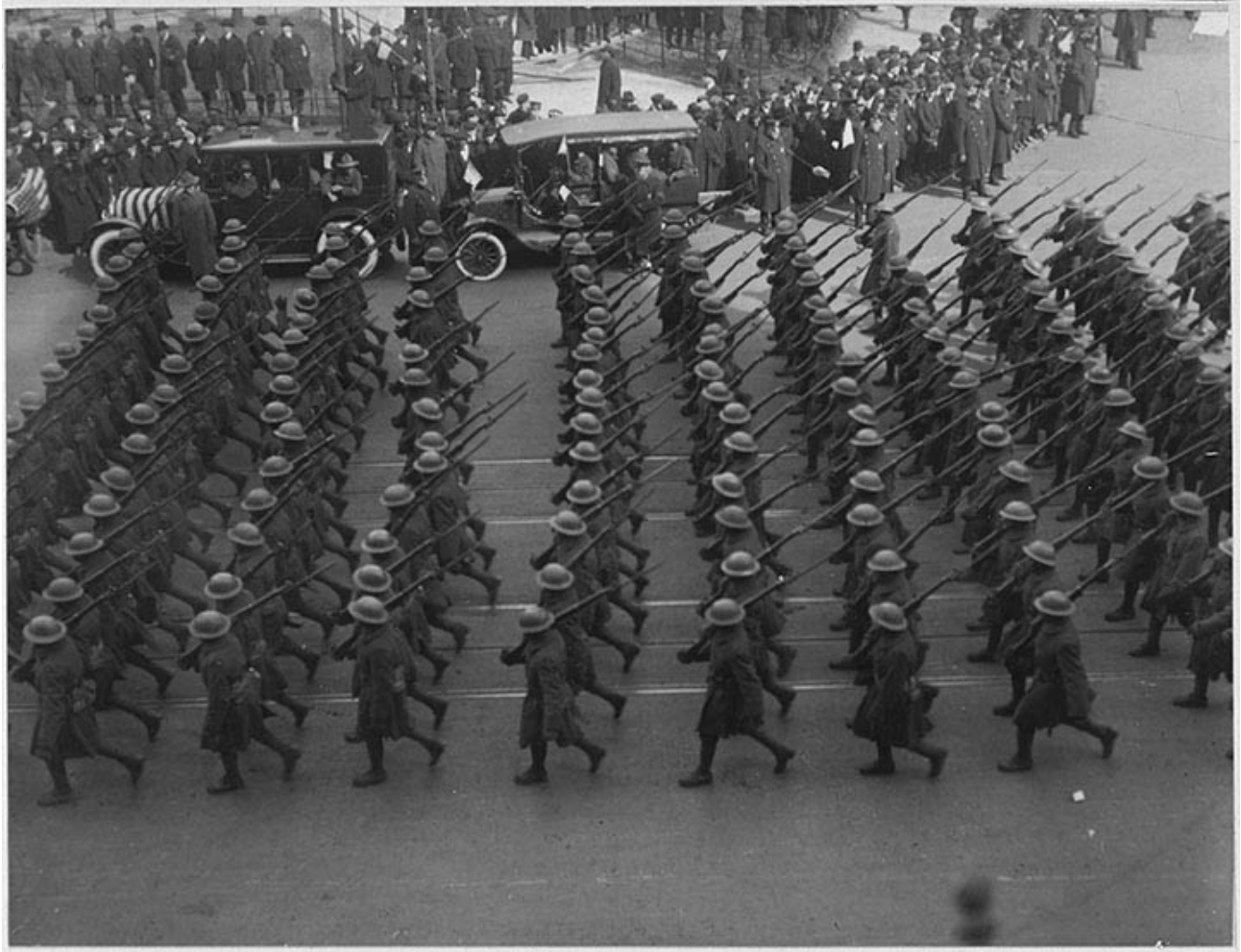


Image caption: Militaristic countries maintain large standing armies

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.

Image alt text: Illustration of two robed figures carrying staffs shaking hands over a stone tablet reading “Entente Cordiale April 1904 – April 1914.”



Image caption: Military alliances between countries try to ensure protection from attack.

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.

Image alt text: Soldier with his arms in the air standing over top of the shape of the continent of Africa.



Image caption: European powers competed intensely for new colonies in late-1800s Africa.

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.

Image alt text: The leaders of Belgium, France, Great Britain, Russia, and Japan holding their own national flag in the air.



Image caption: Nationalists often see their own nation as unique and special.