

First World War

THE ROAD TO WAR – Events that Shaped the Start of War


War is usually the outcome of a long drawn out list of events and complex chain reactions, and the First World War was no different. Ultimately it was the growing power of Germany and the web of alliances formed between different countries, with the intention of avoiding war, that instead drew Europe into the most devastating conflict the world had ever seen.



Agreements to avoid war, that in the end, create it...


Before 1914, country alliances were detailed in signed agreements, or 'treaties'. The objective of these treaties was to create great power blocks with massive strength, that would deter any country from starting a war for fear of the strength of the alliances that would arrayed against it. However the treaties in fact had entirely the opposite effect, as they established opposing sides and treaty obligations that bound these countries to act and put them on the road to war.



Below is an overview of the most powerful countries before 1914 and the alliances in place at that time and how they were formed.






 **Germany.** Before 1870 there were as many as 22 independent German states in central Europe, excluding Austria. The largest of these states was Prussia and when these states merged to form the German Empire, the Prussian king became the Emperor of Germany. This new, powerful, German nation was determined to establish its position as a rival to Britain and France as a world power. To do so it aimed to create an overseas empire and so looked for under-developed countries of the world which they could conquer. Africa, most of which was not under British colonial control, became its first conquest. Within a few years Germany had become the 3rd largest colonial power in Africa. Germany's increased industrial might, and its military and naval power, presented a clear threat to Britain and France's positions as world leaders.

  **Germany / Austria.** Being two of the major powers at that time, in 1879 Austria and Germany formed an alliance to support each other in case of attack. At that time the dual monarchy of Austro-Hungary was the second largest country in Europe after Russia and the third most populated after Germany. Its empire encompassed the present-day nations of Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, the Czech Republic and parts of a number of other countries including Serbia.

 **Britain.** Britain saw the threat that Germany represented and responded by increasing its own production of warships, in particular the new class of battleships, the Dreadnoughts. An arms race had begun between the two greatest industrial powers on the planet. The result of this drive to create greater warships and armies meant that never before had the nations of Europe been so well prepared for war.

  **Britain / France.** By the beginning of the twentieth century the nations of Europe had created vast conscript armies that were incredibly well armed and willing to fight. This caused great anxiety and led Britain to seek an alliance with France. It made sense for Britain and France, who had cooperated successfully together in the last great European War, the Crimean War, to re-establish their relationships. This took the form of the Entente Cordiale. Signed in secret in 1904, this committed each country to offer military support for the other in the event of war.

   **Britain / France / Russia.** Russia was the other great power in Europe. The growing might of Germany and its alliance with Austria was of great concern to Russia which felt isolated. The result was the Triple Entente Agreement signed in 1907 between Britain, France and Russia.



THE ROAD TO WAR – Timeline of Events 1914

28 June – Assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand

Franz Ferdinand was heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne and Inspector General of the Austrian Forces. Franz was assassinated by a secret group, known as The Black Hand, within the Serbian Army. Their plan was force Austria into invading Serbia, which in turn would force Russia to get involved. The resulting conflict, it was hoped, would compel Austria to give up its hold on Serbian territory. (Just 37 days later Europe was at war...)

23 July – Austro-Hungary sends an ultimatum to Serbia

As expected, Austria responded to Franz's assassination by demanding a major change in its relationship with Serbia which was known would be rejected.

27 July – British nation divided by the decision to go to war

War was proposed to the Cabinet by the British Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey, on this day. The Cabinet, Parliament and the nation's population were divided about whether Britain should enter the war. Britain knew that Germany had to be stopped before she became too powerful to be prevented from dominating Europe. No-one really wanted war, but if Britain was to maintain its position as the world's leading nation, now might be a good time to inflict a crushing blow upon Germany from which she would be long in recovering.

28 July - Austria declares war on Serbia

Serbia's refusal to accept Austria's demands was all the justification Austria needed to allow it to mobilize its armies. Austria declared war on Serbia and immediately began to bombard Belgrade. Predictably, Russia could not stand idly by and allow Serbia to be attacked and was quick to demonstrate its support of the Serbs and it too began to mobilize.

1 August - Germany declares war on Russia

Germany demanded, late on the night of 31 July, that Russia should stop mobilising its troops or Germany would respond in kind. As Russia showed no inclination to stand its forces down, Germany declared war on Russia.

3 August - Germany declares war on France

Knowing that France was committed through a treaty to act on Russia's behalf, Germany declared war on France. Germany had long expected to have to fight a great war against the other major powers and knew that they could not win a war fought on two fronts at the same time - against Russia in the east and France in the west. So a plan was devised to solve this problem. It was known that the Russian forces would take weeks to mobilise and so a small German army could be left to guard the country's eastern border. The vast bulk of the German forces would be free to attack France. The plan called not for a direct attack across the Franco-Belgium border, as that is where the main French armies were concentrated, but through indirectly through Belgium. The Germans expected to be able to knock France out of the war in just six weeks. Germany could then turn its full might against Russia.

4 August Great Britain declares war on Germany

Germany's attack through Belgium became the deciding factor for Britain to join the war. Winston Churchill, the First Lord of the Admiralty, recalled the moment when the clock ticked towards the fateful hour:

"The windows of the Admiralty were thrown wide open in the warm night air. Under the roof from which Nelson had received his orders were gathered a small group of admirals and captains and a cluster of clerks, pencils in hand, waiting. Along the Mall from the direction of the Palace the sound of an immense concourse singing 'God save the King' flouted in. On this deep wave there broke the chimes of Big Ben; and, as the first stroke of the hour boomed out, a rustle of movement swept across the room.

"The war telegram, which meant, 'Commence hostilities against Germany', was flashed to the ships and establishments under the White Ensign all over the world. I walked across the Horse Guards Parade to the Cabinet room and reported to the Prime Minister and the Ministers who were assembled there that the deed was done."



Crowds gather near the House of Commons on the eve of war, 3 August 1914.



German troops marching through Brussels during their invasion of Belgium in August 1914.