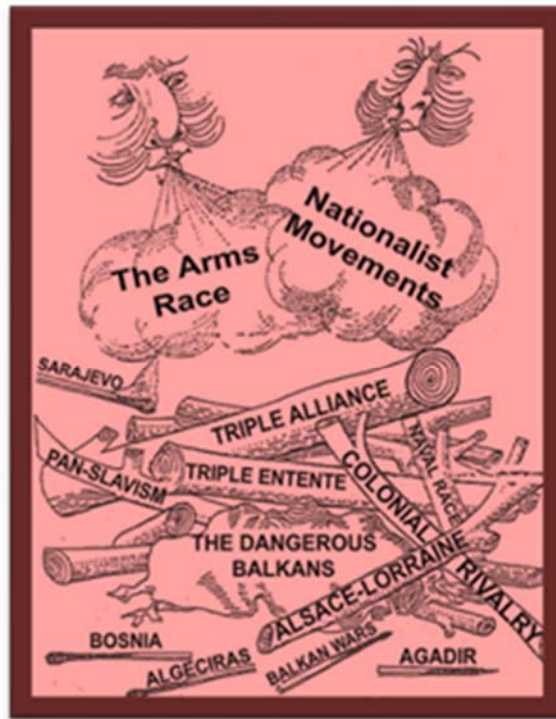


WHAT CAUSED WORLD WAR I?



Causes of World War I by Hank Morgan

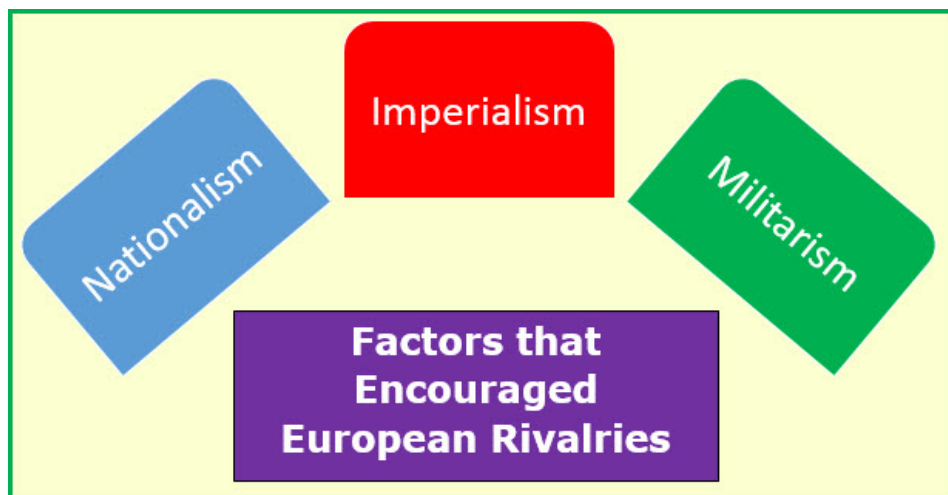
Unit Overview

By the twentieth century, the competition among the nations of Europe developed into intense rivalries and deep resentments. Nationalism, imperialism and militarism combined to convince countries that conflict was a valid way to settle disputes. Events like the Franco-Prussian War led Europeans to believe that it was possible to overwhelm the enemy quickly and to force the defeated to pay. Eventually, all the major nations of Europe were drawn into World War I, and each one was convinced that it would emerge as the victor. In short, every country was in it to win it. Let's see how it all happened!

STOP: Answer Section A Questions

The European Mood

When the twentieth century began, Europeans had developed a sense of pride, superiority and self-confidence in their individual nations. These intense beliefs in country became known as **nationalism**. By 1914, most industrialized nations had given all male citizens the right to vote. While this did not guarantee democratic government, it did give people a vested interest in their country. A new kind of political leader also began to emerge. Supported by political parties, politicians had to sell their agenda to the voters and to convince the public that their course of action was the correct one. These leaders often used their followers' love of country to encourage national unity and to support for their foreign policies.



Nationalism extended overseas as countries competed for colonies, new markets and raw materials through **imperialism**. This led to serious rivalries for political and economic supremacy. As colonial interests continued to clash, leaders came to believe that war was the best way to settle international problems. Governments used military might to back up their demands in a crisis. The race to build larger armies and to stockpile weapons became known as **militarism**. It also glorified war as the highest form of patriotism. Military officers perfected their plans for victory and hoped for a chance to put their ideas to the test. They urged political leaders not to delay taking action since time would only permit other countries to become stronger. Both France and Germany doubled the size of their armies

between 1870 and 1914 for the war which each accepted as inevitable. Most Europeans believed that modern weaponry would result in a short conflict which their nation would win in a few months.

STOP: Answer Section B Questions

Timeline of Events	
1870	The Franco-Prussian was fought.
1882	The Triple Alliance was formed.
1888	Wilhelm II was crowned emperor of Germany.
1890	Wilhelm II forced Bismarck to resign.
1906	The Algeiras Conference met concerning Morocco.
1907	The Triple Entente was formed.
1908	Austria-Hungary annexed Bosnia and Herzegovina.
1914	June 2: Franz Ferdinand was assassinated. July 2: Austria-Hungary sent an ultimatum to Serbia July 28: Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia. August 1: Germany declared war on Russia. August 3: Germany declared war on France August 4: Germany invaded neutral Belgium August 4: Great Britain declared war on Germany

The Franco-Prussian War

By 1867, **Prussia** was well on its way to forming a single German nation. **Kaiser Wilhelm I**, also known as Emperor William I, had made **Otto von Bismarck** his prime minister, or **chancellor**. His priority was the unification of Germany and only few southern German states were still refusing to participate in this plan. For the inhabitants of these regions, religion was the key issue. Most people in this area were Catholic and did not want to be dominated by the Protestant states to the north. Bismarck believed he could win their support if their security was threatened, and he began to look for an opportunity to provoke a war with France.



Napoleon III Surrenders to Wilhelm I

Bismarck's chance came in 1868 as a result of events in **Spain**. Revolutionaries overthrew their queen and offered the throne to Leopold, a relative of the German emperor. The French protested since they did not want their nation surrounded with countries ruled by the royal house of Germany. Bismarck manipulated releases to the press and encouraged the resentment of both the French and the Germans. He knew this would result in a military conflict, but he also knew that Prussia was thoroughly prepared. Soon citizens in both countries demanded a military solution. As expected, France declared war on Prussia on July 19, 1870.

While the French army was getting organized, Prussians forces poured into northern France. The stunned French troops were quickly defeated in five months, and the Prussians dictated harsh terms in the peace settlement. France was forced to pay a huge sum of money to Prussia and to surrender the provinces of **Alsace** and **Lorraine** to Germany. Because those areas were rich in coal and iron, this dealt an additional economic blow to France.



Map of the German Empire 1871

As far as Bismarck was concerned, the war had the desired effect. The southern states were convinced to join Prussia, and the **Second Reich**, the term the Germans used for their empire, became a reality. The new German nation had a solid economic base, and German industry grew rapidly. The French, on the other hand, were humiliated and embittered. They were also determined to regain the Alsace and the Lorraine.

STOP: Answer Section C Questions

Entangling Alliances

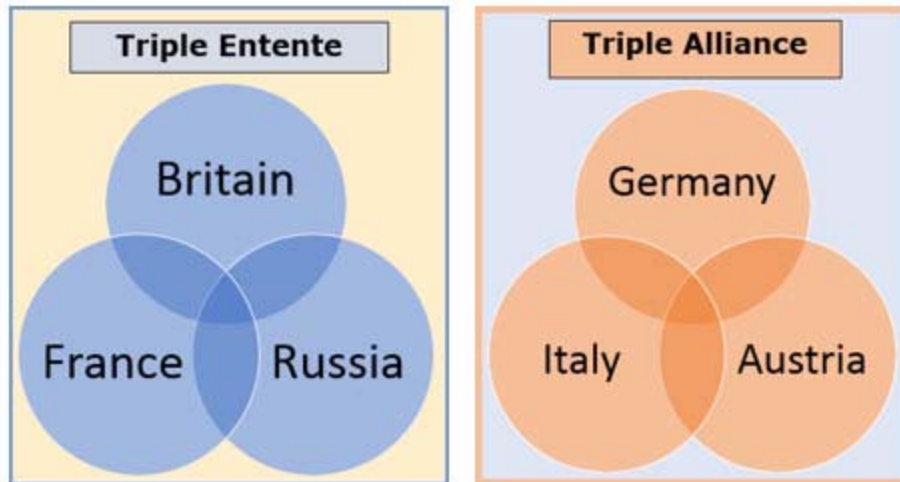
Once Germany became a unified country, Bismarck, nicknamed the **Iron Chancellor**, wanted to eliminate the influence of France which he believed to be Germany's greatest threat. He planned to isolate the French by building alliances with other nations. Therefore, Bismarck created the **Triple Alliance** among Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy. According to this agreement, Germany and Austria-Hungary would protect Italy from France; Italy would remain neutral if war broke out between Austria-Hungary and Russia. However, Bismarck knew there was a possibility that the Russians and the French might unite against the Germans. This would force Germany to fight a war on two fronts. Therefore, the

Germans negotiated a separate treaty with the Russians which stated that, if either country went to war, the other would remain neutral.



Map of European Alliances by John Claire

The British, already alarmed by Germany's military build-up, began their own search for allies. Although they had often been at odds over the quest for colonies, Great Britain and France signed an informal agreement known as an entente. Once Bismarck was out of office, Germany chose not to renew its treaty with Russia. In 1907, the Russians joined the British and the French in an official agreement known as the **Triple Entente**. Although it was not as formal as the Triple Alliance, France and Russia were reasonably sure that Great Britain would not fight against them. These agreements divided Europe into two hostile camps and greatly increased international tensions. Even a minor dispute between any two powers of opposite alliances had the potential to draw all of Europe into war.



STOP: Answer Section D Questions

Change in Leadership; Change in Personality

Bismarck's cleverly crafted system of alliances and treaties managed to offset the French desire for revenge over the results of the Franco-Prussian War, but a change in leadership transformed the way Germany dealt with foreign affairs. **Kaiser Wilhelm I** had left diplomatic relations with other nations in Bismarck's capable hands, but his death gave Germany a new leader. The late Kaiser's son, Frederick, inherited the throne but died ninety days later from throat cancer. Therefore, a grandson of Wilhelm I was crowned **Kaiser Wilhelm II** in 1888 and became Germany's new ruler.



Kaiser Wilhelm II

Wilhelm II was a young, unstable and stubborn person who surrounded himself with those who told him what he wanted to hear. His advisors agreed with the new leader's assessment that his capabilities made Bismarck unnecessary. Therefore, he dismissed Bismarck in 1890 and set his own foreign and domestic policies. Wilhelm II was eager to show off the accomplishments of the new German state, but his tactless public statements and blatant pursuit of world power quickly heightened the tension among the nations of Europe. For example, even though they were economic rivals, Great Britain and Germany had remained on reasonably friendly terms. However, the new Kaiser, even though his mother was English, had an intense dislike for the British. He was determined to challenge them as both a colonial and a naval power. The Kaiser's decision to increase the size of the German fleet and his abrasive comments describing this action encouraged Great Britain to begin an ambitious program of shipbuilding as well. This new brand of German diplomacy added to the feelings of distrust and suspicion among European nations.

STOP: Answer Section E Questions

Crises in Africa

As European countries expanded their colonial empires, friction escalated in other areas of the globe, and the tension soon became apparent in northern Africa. Great Britain had given **Morocco**, an area rich in natural resources and trade possibilities, to France in 1904. Some Moroccans, however, pushed for

independence. Kaiser Wilhelm II decided to take advantage of the situation and made a personal visit to the French territory. He publicly declared Morocco an independent state and demanded the same trading rights as the French. The resulting uproar brought Europe close to war. The Germans demanded an international conference to settle the issue. The **Algeciras Conference** concluded that Morocco should be made a French protectorate, and Germany went home empty handed. The incident widened the divide between the Triple Entente and the Triple Alliance. It reinforced the British/French view that Germany was a serious threat and convinced the Germans that the rest of the world was trying to hold them back.



Map of Morocco

Military conflict nearly erupted in Morocco again in 1911. The Germans claimed the French had violated the agreement reached at the Algeciras Conference in 1906 and sent a warship to make the point. Great Britain again supported France and issued strong warnings to Germany concerning the use of violence. War was avoided when Germany agreed to give the French free rein in Morocco in exchange for a section of French territory in Africa's Congo region.

STOP: Answer Section F Questions

Crises in the Balkans

Another hot spot was the area known as the **Balkans**. Three multi-ethnic empires of Turkey, Russia and Austria-Hungary dominated this region. They all lagged behind their Western European counterparts in terms of both industrial and military strength. A wave of nationalism swept through the region, and people within these empires wanted their own nations. Ethnic groups faced persecution when they demanded civil rights and, eventually, independence. For example, the Ottoman **Emperor Abdul Hamid II** massacred over 100,000 **Armenians** within his borders in 1895 in answer to their request for some role in the government. **Russian Jews** lived in fear of mob attacks known as pogroms, which destroyed their homes and businesses.



Map of Europe: 1914

The weakest of these empires was the **Ottoman or Turkish Empire**. By 1900, several groups had broken away and formed new nations including Albania, Bulgaria, Montenegro, Romania, and Serbia. Nationalism encouraged **Serbia**, which had a large Slavic population, to absorb all the Slavs in the Balkan region under its flag. Russia, who also had a large Slavic population, saw itself as the protector of the Slavs and supported these movements. The Russians also thought that friendly relations with these countries would give them access to seaports on the Mediterranean. All of this put Russia in direct confrontation with Austria-Hungary which felt threatened by this rise of nationalism in the Balkans.



Painting Showing a Scene from the First Balkan War

Both Austria-Hungary and Serbia had plans to take over **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, two Balkan states with large Slavic populations. The Austrians moved first and annexed both countries in 1908. Serbia was furious, and Russia supported the Serbians by announcing plans to mobilize for war. However, Germany stood firmly behind its ally, Austria-Hungary. Since the Russians knew they were unprepared to go to battle against both the Germans and the Austrians, Russia backed down, and war was averted. However, incidents in the Balkan region continued to lead to more crises such as the **First and Second Balkan Wars**. Peace became more fragile with each incident.

STOP: Answer Section G Questions

The Final Straw

By the summer of 1914, most Europeans had come to the conclusion that war was inevitable. The annexation of Bosnia by Austria-Hungary continued to be deeply resented not only by Bosnia itself but also by Serbia. Terrorist groups formed throughout the region, and one of them, called the **Black Hand**, was determined to do something dramatic to draw worldwide attention to their cause. An opportunity came on June 28, 1914. The 51-year-old, unpopular heir to the Austrian throne, **Franz Ferdinand**, accompanied by his wife, was scheduled to inspect Austro-Hungarian troops stationed near the capital city of **Sarajevo** in Bosnia. Local dignitaries were to meet the royal couple at the train station and to take them by car to City Hall for lunch before the military review.



Archduke Franz Ferdinand

Bosnian officials knew of the Black Hand and were on high alert. As crowds lined the streets, seven members of the group were stationed along the motorcade route and managed to throw a bomb under the car traveling behind the Archduke. Although he and his wife were not hurt, several members of the Archduke's staff were injured and hospitalized. Franz Ferdinand insisted on stopping by the hospital after lunch to check on the injured. Since there was some confusion over the exact course, **Gavrilo Princip** was able to approach the car, fire two shots and kill both the heir to the Austrian throne and his wife.

Pulling in the Major Powers

As the news of the assassination spread, people were horrified but not surprised. Austria-Hungary blamed Serbia for the crime but did not react immediately. Instead, they conferred with the Germans to assure their backing if a war with Serbia involved other powers. Kaiser Wilhelm II provided the Austrians with a **blank check**, which meant that Germany would support any course of action Austria chose. On July 23, 1914, Austria-Hungary sent a set of demands, or an **ultimatum**, to the Serbians and gave them forty-eight hours to reply. The list was deliberately harsh; the Austrians did not expect the Serbs to comply. However, the Serbs knew that not to do so would mean war with Austria-Hungary, a powerful enemy. Therefore, Serbia accepted the terms of the ultimatum but requested arbitration on two items. The Austrians, unsatisfied with this response, declared war on Serbia on July 28, 1914.



Austrian Postcard: 1914

On the following day, Russia began moving troops to the border it shared with Austria in support of Serbia. The Germans saw this as a threat to their ally and declared war on Russia. Knowing that France would honor the Triple Entente, Germany also declared war on France and quickly invaded **Belgium**, a neutral country, in order to attack the French from the north. This prompted Great Britain to declare war on Germany. The alliance system quickly pulled the major powers of Europe into a full-scale war. Everyone was in it to win it. Remembering the example set by the Franco-Prussian War, the idea was to fight a short war, to win quickly and to make the enemy pay. No one really understood that the conflict, which became known as **World War I**, would be global, long and enormously destructive.

STOP: Go to Section H Questions

What Does It All Mean?

As Europe rushed to battle, both sides were confident they could achieve a quick, easy victory. People reasoned that a brief conflict would resolve tensions between countries, slow political turmoil and postpone social change. War was viewed as a glorious and heroic quest as well as a test of national unity. The Great War, as World War I became known, would shatter every expectation. No one fully

realized the destructive power of modern warfare or the potential of the United States of America. How would the world deal with a long, devastating conflict? How would people cope with the loss of life as well as the physical damage? Would all the countries involved continue to fight and would they continue to honor their original alliances? History holds the answers to these questions.

Additional Activities and Resources



[Main Points Worksheet](#)

[In 1914 Germany and Russia Talked about Avoiding the War but Failed to Stop It Article with Quiz](#)

[The M.A.I.N. Causes of World War I Worksheet](#)