**Nationalism**

Nationalism was prevalent in early 20th century Europe and was a significant cause of World War I. Most pre-war Europeans believed in the cultural, economic and military supremacy of their nation. Nationalism could also be found in other aspects of popular culture, including literature, music and theatre. Royals, politicians and diplomats did little to deflate nationalism – and some actively contributed to it.

Nationalism gave citizens excessive confidence in their nation, their governments and their military strength. It assured them that their country was fair, righteous and without blame. In contrast, nationalist ideas demonised rival nations, caricaturing them as aggressive, scheming, deceitful, backward or uncivilised. It convinced many citizens their nation was being threatened by the plotting, scheming and hungry imperialism of its rivals. Nationalist and militarist rhetoric assured people that if war erupted, their nation would emerge victorious. In concert with its brothers, imperialism and militarism, nationalism contributed to a mass delusion that made a European war seem both necessary and winnable.

Europe’s nationalism and its indifference to war can be explained. Aside from the Crimean War (1853-56) and the Franco-Prussian War (1870-71), the 1800s were a century of comparative peace for Europe. Citizens of England, France and Germany had grown accustomed to colonial wars. These conflicts were fought against undeveloped and under-equipped opponents in faraway places, and were mostly brief and victorious. With the exception of France, which was defeated by the Prussians in 1871, none of Europe’s Great Powers had experienced a significant military defeat for more than half a century. This indifference to war, along with the arms race, contributed to a growing delusion of invincibility. Britons believed their naval power, backed by the economic might of the British Empire, would give them the upper hand in any war.

The Germans placed great faith in Prussian military efficiency, their industrial base, their growth in armaments and their expanding fleet of battleships and U-boats (submarines). In the event of a war, the German high command had supreme confidence in the Schlieffen Plan, a preemptive military strategy designed to win a war against Germany’s eastern and western neighbours (Russia and France). Within Russia, the tsar believed his throne and empire were protected by God – as well as Russia’s massive standing army of 1.5 million men, Europe’s largest peacetime land force. Russia’s commanders believed its enormous population gave it the upper hand over the much smaller nations of Western Europe. The French placed their faith in a wall of concrete fortresses and defences running the length of their eastern border, capable of deterring and withstanding any German attack.

By the late 1800s some European powers had grown almost drunk with patriotism and nationalism – not without some cause. Britain, to focus on one example, had enjoyed two centuries of imperial, commercial and naval dominance, her empire spanning one quarter of the globe. The lyrics of a popular patriotic song, Rule, Britannia!, trumpeted that “Britons never never will be slaves”. London had spent the 19th century advancing her imperial and commercial interests and avoiding wars – however the unification of Germany, the speed of German armament and the bellicosity of Kaiser Wilhelm II caused concern among British nationalists. England’s ‘penny press’ – cheap serialised novels, essays and short stories – fuelled foreign rivalries by publishing incredible fictions about foreign intrigues, espionage, future war and invasion. The Battle of Dorking (1871), one of the best known examples of ‘invasion literature’, was a wild tale about an invasion of England by German forces. By 1910 a Londoner could buy dozens of tawdry novellas, each gamely warning of German, Russian or French aggression, perpetrated against England or her interests. This invasion literature often employed racial stereotyping or innuendo: the German was painted as cold, cruel and calculating, the Russian was an uncultured barbarian, the Frenchman was a leisure-seeking layabout, the Chinese were a race of murderous opium-smoking savages. Penny novelists, cartoonists and satirists mocked the rulers of these countries. Two of the most popular targets were the German kaiser and the Russian tsar, who were both ridiculed for their arrogance, excessive ambition or megalomania.

German nationalism and xenophobia was no less intense, though it came from different origins. Unlike Britain, Germany was a comparatively young nation, formed in 1871 through the unification of 26 German-speaking states and territories. German nationalism or ‘Pan-Germanism’ was the political glue that bound these states together. The leaders of post-1871 Germany relied on nationalist sentiment to consolidate and strengthen the new nation and to gain public support. German culture – from the poetry of Goethe to the music of Richard Wagner – was promoted and celebrated. German nationalism was backed by German militarism; the state of the nation was defined and reflected by the strength of its military forces. The new Kaiser (emperor), Wilhelm II, was the personification of this new Germany. Both the kaiser and his nation were young, nationalistic, obsessed with military power and imperial expansion. The kaiser was proud of Germany’s achievements but nervous about its future; he was envious of other powers and desperate for national success. In the kaiser’s mind, the main obstacle to German expansion was Britain. Wilhelm envied Britain’s vast empire and enormous naval power – but he thought the British avaricious and hypocritical. The British government oversaw the world’s largest empire yet maneuvered against German colonial expansion in Africa and Asia. The British became a popular target in the pre-war German press, where Britain was painted as expansionist, selfish, greedy and obsessed with money. Anti-British sentiment intensified during the Boer War of 1899-1902, Britain’s war against farmer-settlers for control of South Africa.

As the Great Powers beat their chests and filled their people with a sense of righteousness and superiority, another form of nationalism was on the rise in southern Europe. This nationalism was not about supremacy or military power – but the right of ethnic groups to independence, autonomy and self-government. With the world divided into large empires and spheres of influence, many different regions, races and religious groups wanted freedom from their imperial masters. Nationalist groups contributed to the weakening of the Ottoman Empire in Eastern Europe, by seeking to throw off Muslim rule.

No nationalist movement had a greater impact in the outbreak of war than Slavic groups in the Balkans. Pan-Slavism, the belief that the Slavic peoples of Eastern Europe should have their own nation, was a powerful force in the region. Russian nationalism is often seen as an extension of Slavic nationalism as Russian identify ethnically and culturally Slavic. Slavic nationalism was strongest in Serbia, where it had risen significantly in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Pan-Slavism was particularly opposed to the Austro-Hungarian Empire and its control and influence over the region. Aggravated by Vienna’s annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, young Serbs joined radical nationalist groups like the ‘Black Hand’ (Crna Ruka). These groups hoped to drive Austria-Hungary from the Balkans and establish a ‘Greater Serbia’, a unified state for all Slavic people. It was this pan-Slavic nationalism that inspired the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo in June 1914, an event that led directly to the outbreak of World War I.

**Imperialism**

Imperialism and imperial rivalry provided both a cause and context for World War I. Imperialism is a system where a powerful nation controls and exploits one or more colonies.

Prior to World War I the world’s largest, richest and most dominant imperial power was Great Britain. The British Empire famously occupied one quarter of the globe (“the sun never sets on Britain” was a famous slogan of the mid-19th century). Many of these colonies were acquired with little difficulty; others took more time, effort and bloodshed. British imperialism was focused on maintaining and expanding trade, the importation of raw materials and the sale of manufactured goods. Britain’s imperial power was reinforced by her powerful navy, the world’s largest, and a fleet of mercantile (commercial) vessels.

Another significant imperial power was France, Britain’s closest neighbor. French imperial holdings included Indochina (Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia), some Pacific islands and several colonies in west and north-west Africa. The German Empire included Shandong (a province of China), New Guinea, Samoa and other Pacific islands, and several colonies in central and south-west Africa.The Spanish Empire had once included the Philippines and large parts of South America, though by the early 20th century Spain’s imperial power was dwindling.

Empires closer to home included Russia, Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman sultanate. Russia ruled over Finland, Poland and several central Asian regions as an imperial power; its disastrous (failed) war against Japan in 1904-5 was an attempt to extend Russia’s imperial reach further into Korea and northern China.

Despite condemnation of European imperialism in America, the United States also engaged in a degree of empire building, particularly towards the end of the 1800s.

The second half of the 1800s produced a significant ‘rush for empire’. This desperate push for new colonies was fueled by rising nationalism, increasing demand for land and dwindling opportunities at home. Two relative newcomers to empire-building were the newly unified nations of Germany and Italy. The Germans would develop their imperialist foreign policy that they called Weltpolitik and began to acquire territories.

In 1884 Germany acquired Togoland, the Cameroons and South West Africa (now Namibia). Six years later a sizeable strip of East Africa was under German control; this territory was renamed Tanganyika (now Tanzania). This African colonization was well received by the German population – however it caused problems in Britain and France. Many in London dreamed of a British-owned railway running the length of Africa (“from Cairo to the Cape”) and German colonies in eastern Africa were an obstacle to this vision. This was one of the many examples of tension between European nations in the rush for empire.

Imperial instability was another contributor to European tensions. Critical problems in the Ottoman Empire also affected the balance of power in Eastern Europe. Described by satirists as the ‘Sick Man of Europe’, the Ottoman sultanate was in rapid political, military and economic decline by the second half of the 1800s. The Ottomans were defeated in several wars. These defeats, along with rising nationalism and revolutions in Ottoman-controlled regions, resulted in gradual but significant losses of territory. With the Ottoman Empire shrinking and at risk of complete collapse,

Europe’s other imperial powers clamored to secure territory or influence in the region. Austria-Hungary hoped to expand into the Balkans; Russia moved to limit Austrian expansion while securing access to the Black Sea; Germany wanted to ensure the security and completion of its Berlin-to-Baghdad railway.

Britain and France also had colonial and trade interests in the region. The ‘Eastern question’ – the issue of what would happen in eastern Europe as the Ottomans withdrew – was an important talking point of the late 19th century. These developments drew the Great Powers of Europe into the Balkan sphere, creating opportunities for rivalry and increased tensions.

**Alliances**

A number of alliances had been signed by countries between the years 1879 and 1914. These were important because they meant that some countries had no option but to declare war if one of their allies.

European alliances were designed to keep a balance of power. The Triple Entente balanced the Triple Alliance. Belgium had pledged neutrality but made a treaty with Britain to protect it in case of attack. The Ottoman Empire was weak and had allowed Germany too much control over its foreign policy. As a whole, these alliances assured total peace or total war. There was nothing in between: one incident could set off a chain reaction that would draw all the countries of Europe into a conflict.

**Militarism**

The Industrial Revolution brought great changes to all aspects of life, including the military. Armies were now swifter, stronger, more mobile and more deadly. New technologies also created new weapons. The cavalry and bayonets of the past would now meet tanks, machine guns, howitzer cannons, and airplanes on the battlefields of Europe.

The menace of the hostile division led to an arms race, another cause of World War I. Acknowledging that Germany was the leader in military organization and efficiency, the great powers of Europe copied the universal conscription, large reserves and detailed planning of the Prussian system. Technological and organizational developments led to the formation of general staffs with precise plans for mobilization and attack that often could not be reversed once they were begun. The German *von Schlieffen Plan* to attack France before Russia in the event of war with Russia was one such complicated plan that plan drew more counties into the war than necessary.

Armies and navies were greatly expanded. The standing armies of France and Germany doubled in size between 1870 and 1914. Naval expansion was also extremely competitive, particularly between Germany and Great Britain. By 1889, the British had established the principle that in order to maintain naval superiority in the event of war they would have to have a navy two and a half times as large as the second-largest navy. This motivated the British to launch the Dreadnought, invented by Admiral Sir John Fisher, in 1906. The Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905 had demonstrated how effective these battleships were. As Britain increased their output of battleships, Germany correspondingly stepped up their naval production, including the Dreadnought. Although efforts for worldwide disarmament were made at the Hague Conferences of 1899 and 1907, international rivalry caused the arms race to continue to feed on itself.

Militarism is the inseparable twin of Imperialism.

The Germans watched in alarm as control of the world fell into the hands of less than a half a dozen (European) countries. Having only become a country a few decades earlier in 1871, the Germans grew anxious that they would be left behind with no colonies or imperial possessions. As a result, Germany joined the imperial club realizing that to compete with empires like Britain and France it would have to have a sizable military, especially a navy. Within a few decades Germany built up her industry and her army to become the most powerful in Europe. France became increasingly more fearful as Germany grew more powerful.

When the Germans decided to initiate an extensive naval construction program, it was Britain's turn to be uneasy. Having the world's biggest empire required the world's biggest navy. When Germany started cranking out battleships and destroyers the British reacted by building more of their own to outpace the Germans, instigating a naval arms race.

In 1906, the British produced the HMS Dreadnought, an ultra-modern ship that instantly made all other ships obsolete. Germany countered Britain's dominance of the seas by investing enormous sums on battleships and submarines. Germany and Great Britain were locked in an arms race to see who would be the strongest.

As Germany's power grew this arms race spread throughout the continent. Great Britain, France, Germany, and Russia all scrambled to produce and stockpile weapons and ammunition and found themselves sitting atop huge arsenals.

In the face of this threat, European nations began banding together into systems of complex alliances.

