

## Topic 7.2: Causes of World War I

### Standards Table

Theme	Learning Objective	Key Concept(s)	Historical Thinking Skill(s)	Standards Alignment
Governance (GOV)	Explain the causes and consequences of World War I	KC-6.2.IV.B.i	Causation, Contextualization, Sourcing, Comparison	AP World History: Modern Unit 7

### Learning Objectives

By the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

- Identify major long-term and short-term causes of World War I
- Explain how nationalism, imperialism, militarism, and alliances interacted to produce conflict
- Analyze complex historical documents using sourcing and evidence
- Evaluate the relative importance of different causes in a DBQ-style argument

### Lesson Overview

World War I emerged from a combination of long-term structural tensions and immediate political crises. European powers competed for global influence through imperial expansion, while nationalist movements destabilized multiethnic empires such as Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire. Militarization and alliance-building further increased the likelihood that a regional dispute would escalate into a broader war. By 1914, Europe had become a highly interconnected and volatile system. In this lesson, you will engage with a set of documents similar to those found on the AP exam. You will analyze point of view, purpose, and historical context, and use these documents to construct an argument about causation. The goal is not only to understand why World War I began, but also to develop the skills necessary to write a high-scoring DBQ.

### Essential Vocabulary

- **Revanchism:** A political movement driven by a desire to recover lost territory, especially in France after the Franco-Prussian War.
- **Conscription:** Mandatory enlistment for state service, typically into the military, used widely in pre-WWI Europe.
- **Balance of Power:** A system in which nations form alliances to prevent any one state from dominating Europe.

- **Balkan Nationalism:** Ethnic nationalist movements in Southeast Europe seeking independence from empires.
- **Mobilization:** The process of assembling and preparing military forces for war.

### Background Reading

In the late 19th century, European powers intensified their competition for overseas empires. Britain and France had already established vast colonial holdings, while newly unified Germany sought to expand its global influence. This competition led to diplomatic crises such as the Moroccan Crises, where Germany challenged French control in North Africa. These confrontations increased distrust and highlighted the fragility of European diplomacy. Imperial rivalries therefore contributed significantly to the tensions that preceded World War I.

At the same time, militarism reshaped European politics and society. Governments expanded their armies through conscription and invested heavily in new technologies such as machine guns and dreadnought battleships. Germany's naval expansion challenged Britain's traditional dominance at sea, leading to a costly arms race. Military leaders developed detailed war plans, including Germany's Schlieffen Plan, which depended on rapid mobilization. Once mobilization began, it was difficult to stop, making war more likely.

Nationalism also played a critical role, particularly in the Balkans. Slavic populations under Austro-Hungarian rule sought independence or unification with Serbia, which was supported by Russia. The decline of the Ottoman Empire created a power vacuum in the region, intensifying competition among neighboring states. The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in 1914 by a Bosnian Serb nationalist reflected these tensions. Nationalism also influenced Western European powers, as countries sought prestige and unity through military strength.

The alliance system further escalated tensions by linking the fates of multiple countries. The Triple Alliance and Triple Entente created opposing blocs, ensuring that a conflict between two nations could quickly spread. Austria-Hungary's declaration of war on Serbia triggered a chain reaction of mobilizations involving Russia, Germany, France, and Britain. This interconnected system transformed a regional conflict into a global war.

Compared to earlier conflicts such as the Napoleonic Wars, World War I represented both continuity and change. While nationalism and competition for power remained important causes, industrialization increased the scale and destructiveness of warfare. The global reach of European empires also meant that the conflict extended beyond Europe, involving colonies and non-European nations.

## DBQ DOCUMENTS

### Document 1

- Type: Speech
- Author: Kaiser Wilhelm II
- Date: 1908

“Our rapidly expanding commerce and industry demand protection across the seas, and it is no longer sufficient for Germany to rely upon the goodwill of others. The great powers of the world have secured their positions through strength, not hesitation. England commands the oceans; France extends her reach across continents. Shall Germany alone remain confined, deprived of her rightful influence? No—our future depends upon our readiness to defend our interests wherever they may be challenged. A strong navy is not an instrument of aggression but a necessity for survival in a competitive world. Without it, we risk humiliation and exclusion from the ranks of great nations.”

**Historical Situation:** Germany is expanding its navy during rising imperial competition.

**Perspective/Limitation:** Nationalistic leadership perspective; justifies militarization.

**Use in Argument:** Evidence of militarism and imperial rivalry.

#### Questions:

1. How does Wilhelm II’s position influence his justification for naval expansion?
2. What evidence suggests Germany feels threatened by other powers?
3. How does this document illustrate militarism as a long-term cause of WWI?

### Document 2

- Type: Political Cartoon (described textually)
- Author: British publication *Punch*
- Date: 1914

The cartoon depicts Europe as a crowded stage where political leaders, each labeled by country, stand atop barrels marked “alliances,” “armaments,” and “national pride.” A small spark labeled “Balkan crisis” is shown igniting a fuse that runs beneath all the barrels. Some leaders appear confident, while others look alarmed, yet none attempt to extinguish the spark. In the background, shadowy figures representing the general public watch helplessly as the fuse burns closer to the explosives.

**Historical Situation:** Pre-war tensions following Balkan crises.

**Perspective/Limitation:** British critique; simplifies causes visually.

**Use in Argument:** Demonstrates interconnected causes.

**Questions:**

1. What is the cartoonist's purpose in depicting leaders as passive?
2. What elements represent long-term causes of war?
3. How does this document demonstrate causation through multiple factors?

**Document 3**

- Type: Diplomatic Correspondence
- Author: Austro-Hungarian Foreign Ministry
- Date: July 1914

“The continued agitation emanating from Serbia has reached a level that can no longer be tolerated by the Imperial Government. These movements, which promote the disintegration of our monarchy by encouraging Slavic unrest, are not isolated incidents but part of a broader campaign undermining imperial authority. If decisive measures are not taken, the consequences will extend beyond our borders, inviting instability throughout the region. It is therefore the duty of the Empire to act firmly and without delay. To do otherwise would signal weakness and encourage further insurrection among our subject populations.”

**Historical Situation:** Austria-Hungary responding to Serbian nationalism.

**Perspective/Limitation:** Biased toward imperial preservation.

**Use in Argument:** Shows nationalism and regional instability.

**Questions:**

1. How does the author's perspective shape the portrayal of Serbia?
2. What evidence indicates fear of internal collapse?
3. How does this document reflect nationalism as a cause of WWI?

**Document 4**

- Type: Newspaper Editorial
- Author: French journalist
- Date: 1913

“It is no longer possible to ignore the rapid expansion of German military power. Each year brings new regiments, new weapons, and new assurances that such preparations are merely defensive. Yet history teaches us that such assurances are often precursors

to aggression. France must not be caught unprepared, for the security of the nation rests upon vigilance. Peace is desirable, but peace without strength is an illusion. If war comes, it will not be because it was sought, but because it was made inevitable by those who mistake restraint for weakness.”

**Historical Situation:** Rising tensions between France and Germany.

**Perspective/Limitation:** Nationalistic and defensive tone.

**Use in Argument:** Evidence of militarism and fear.

**Questions:**

1. What is the purpose of this editorial?
2. What evidence suggests distrust of Germany?
3. How does fear contribute to escalation toward war?

**Document 5**

- Type: Government Ultimatum
- Author: Austria-Hungary
- Date: July 1914

“The Royal Government of Serbia shall suppress all publications inciting hatred against the Monarchy and dissolve any organization whose activities are directed against its territorial integrity. Furthermore, Serbian authorities must accept the participation of Austro-Hungarian officials in the investigation and suppression of subversive movements within its borders. Failure to comply fully with these demands will compel the Imperial Government to take such measures as it deems necessary to protect its interests and maintain order.”

**Historical Situation:** Following assassination of Franz Ferdinand.

**Perspective/Limitation:** One-sided demands; coercive diplomacy.

**Use in Argument:** Immediate cause of war.

**Questions:**

1. Who is the intended audience of this ultimatum?
2. What evidence suggests these demands are difficult to accept?
3. How does this document illustrate escalation from tension to war?

## Document 6

- Type: Memoir
- Author: British soldier
- Date: 1920

“When the call came, we answered without hesitation, though few of us could explain the quarrel that had brought Europe to war. We were told that our nation stood in peril and that honor demanded our service. There was pride in the uniform, and a belief that we were part of something greater than ourselves. Only later did we begin to question whether such sacrifices were necessary, or whether we had been swept along by forces beyond our understanding.”

**Historical Situation:** Reflection after WWI.

**Perspective/Limitation:** Limited political awareness.

**Use in Argument:** Shows nationalism’s influence on populations.

### Questions:

1. What does this reveal about the perspective of ordinary soldiers?
2. What evidence shows the role of nationalism?
3. How does this document reflect broader social causes of war?

## Document 7

- Type: Government Proclamation
- Author: Tsar Nicholas II
- Date: 1914

“In this grave hour, Russia cannot remain indifferent to the fate of the Slavic peoples whose security is threatened. Our duty, both as a great power and as a protector of our brethren, compels us to act. Mobilization is not undertaken lightly, but necessity demands that we prepare to defend our interests and uphold our honor. We seek no conflict, yet we cannot permit aggression to proceed unchecked, lest it embolden those who would disrupt the balance of Europe.”

**Historical Situation:** Russia mobilizes in support of Serbia.

**Perspective/Limitation:** Nationalistic and political.

**Use in Argument:** Shows alliances and escalation.

### Questions:

1. How does Nicholas II justify mobilization?
2. What evidence reflects Pan-Slavism?

3. How does this demonstrate alliances escalating war?

**Key Table: Document Grouping**

Category	Documents
Militarism	1, 4
Nationalism	3, 6, 7
Alliances	2, 7
Immediate Causes	5

## Historical Reasoning

### Change Over Time

Before World War I, wars were often limited in scope, but industrialization transformed warfare into a global conflict. The use of conscription and advanced weapons increased both the scale and destruction of war. Governments mobilized entire societies, not just armies. This marked a shift toward total war. The alliance system also expanded conflicts beyond regional boundaries.

### Continuity Over Time

Competition for power and territory had long been a feature of European history. Nationalism and rivalry between states persisted from earlier periods such as the Napoleonic era. These tensions continued into the early 20th century. However, they became more dangerous due to industrialization and alliances. Thus, traditional causes remained but intensified.

### Comparison

Compared to earlier wars, World War I was more industrialized and global. Both WWI and earlier conflicts involved alliances and nationalism. However, WWI introduced trench warfare and mass casualties. This demonstrates both continuity and change. The causes were similar, but the scale was different.

## Key Takeaways

- World War I resulted from multiple interacting long-term causes
- Militarism and alliances made conflict more likely and more widespread
- Nationalism played a major role in both elite decisions and popular support
- The assassination acted as a trigger, not the sole cause
- Understanding causation requires evaluating multiple factors together

## DBQ Practice

### **Prompt:**

Evaluate the extent to which long-term causes were more significant than immediate events in the outbreak of World War I.

### **Task Instructions:**

- Develop a clear thesis
- Use at least 4 documents
- Include outside evidence
- Explain sourcing for at least 2 documents