

## Topic 7.9: Causation in Global Conflict

### Standards Table

Theme	Learning Objective	Key Concept(s)	Historical Thinking Skill(s)	Standards Alignment
Argumentation / Review of Unit 7	Explain the relative significance of the causes of global conflict in the period 1900 to the present	KC-6.1; KC-6.2; KC-6.2.I; KC-6.2.I.A; KC-6.2.II.D	Causation, Comparison, Argument Development, Contextualization, Evidence Use	AP World History: Modern Unit 7

### Learning Objectives

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

- Identify major causes of global conflict in the period 1900 to the present.
- Explain how political instability, ideology, imperialism, nationalism, economic crisis, and technological change contributed to conflict.
- Analyze historical documents by evaluating claim, context, sourcing, and usefulness in argument.
- Evaluate the relative significance of different causes of global conflict in a historically defensible argument.

### Lesson Overview

This final lesson in Unit 7 is designed as a causation and argumentation review. Rather than focusing on one event, it asks students to look across the unit and decide which causes of global conflict were most significant from 1900 to the present. Students should draw on what they have already studied about World War I, World War II, imperialism, total war, revolution, economic crisis, and mass atrocities. The central challenge is not simply to list causes, but to weigh them, connect them, and defend a ranking with historical evidence.

In this lesson, you will work with a set of documents that span multiple conflicts and developments from the twentieth century. Some emphasize nationalism and imperial rivalry, others highlight ideology, political instability, economic crisis, or technology. Your task is to decide which factors mattered most and to explain why. As in a strong DBQ or LEQ, you will need to make choices, organize evidence, use historical reasoning, and build a line of argument that shows relative significance rather than simple description.

## Essential Vocabulary

- **Relative Significance:** Judging which causes mattered more, less, or differently in producing a historical development.
- **Catalyst:** A short-term event or trigger that causes a larger process to accelerate.
- **Underlying Cause:** A deeper structural factor that helps make later events possible.
- **Political Instability:** A condition in which governments are weak, divided, or vulnerable to crisis and upheaval.
- **Escalation:** The process by which a conflict becomes larger, more intense, or more widespread.

## Background Reading

Global conflict after 1900 emerged from the interaction of multiple forces rather than a single cause. Nationalism remained extremely powerful, encouraging loyalty to the nation while also increasing rivalry, separatism, and ethnic tension. Imperial competition intensified conflict as states fought over colonies, strategic territory, resources, and prestige. These forces were already visible before World War I, especially in the Balkans and in competition among the major European empires. Outside evidence such as the Moroccan Crises, Balkan nationalism, or the alliance system can help students explain how rivalry grew before 1914.

Economic crisis also played a major role in shaping conflict. The Great Depression weakened governments, increased unemployment, and made extremist politics more attractive in many countries. In Germany, economic suffering helped undermine democracy and increase support for Nazism. In Japan, economic pressures encouraged expansionist arguments about access to markets and raw materials. Economic instability did not automatically cause war, but it made societies more vulnerable to radical solutions. Outside evidence such as the collapse of the Weimar Republic or Japanese expansion into Manchuria can help students support arguments about economic causation.

Ideology became especially important in the twentieth century. Fascism, communism, and radical nationalism shaped how governments defined enemies, mobilized populations, and justified violence. The rise of totalitarian regimes transformed political conflict into more absolute struggles. In Nazi Germany, racial ideology and aggressive militarism drove expansion and genocide. In revolutionary contexts such as Russia and Mexico, political crisis and ideological change also challenged older orders, though not always in the same way. Students should be prepared to explain that ideology often mattered most when combined with state power, crisis, and existing resentment.

Technological change also altered the nature of global conflict. Rapid advances in transportation, industry, communications, medicine, and weapons made it easier for states to mobilize quickly, supply large armies, spread propaganda, and inflict destruction on a wider scale. Railroads, mechanized warfare, strategic bombing, radio, and eventually atomic weapons changed not only how wars were fought but how societies experienced conflict. Technology was often not the root cause of war, but it could intensify and widen conflict once it began. A strong argument will often distinguish between causes of conflict and factors that shaped its scale and consequences.

Political instability and the collapse or weakening of empires also contributed to global conflict. The Ottoman, Russian, and Qing empires all faced internal and external pressures, and their decline helped create new states, revolutions, and power struggles. The Russian Empire's collapse contributed to communist revolution, while political crisis in Mexico helped produce the Mexican Revolution. These developments show that not all conflict in the twentieth century came from war between great powers alone. Internal instability, revolution, and anti-imperial resistance also challenged the global order. Students should therefore think broadly about global conflict, including interstate war, revolution, imperial violence, and ideological struggle.

## DBQ Documents Analysis Section

### Document 1

- **Type of Source:** Diplomatic reflection
- **Author:** European statesman writing after the outbreak of World War I
- **Date:** 1915

“No single cabinet in Europe planned in advance the whole catastrophe now consuming the continent, yet all contributed to the conditions that made disaster possible. We had created a system in which alliances were praised as protections, armaments were defended as precautions, and national pride was stirred whenever compromise appeared to yield less glory than defiance. In such a climate, a regional quarrel could not remain regional for long. Every power feared encirclement, humiliation, or strategic loss, and each believed that delay might prove more dangerous than action. The crisis in the Balkans was the spark, but the material awaiting ignition had accumulated through years of rivalry, military preparation, and political vanity. Those who search for one villain alone will miss the deeper lesson, which is that Europe armed itself intellectually and materially for general war long before the first declarations were issued.”

**Historical Situation:** This source reflects attempts to explain the outbreak of World War I after it had already begun.

**Perspective / Limitation:** The author stresses shared responsibility and structural causes, which may understate the role of particular decisions or actors.

**Use in Argument:** This document can be used to argue that nationalism, alliances, and militarism were major underlying causes of global conflict.

### Questions

1. What is the author's main claim about the causes of World War I?
2. What evidence in the document points to long-term rather than short-term causes?
3. How does this document help explain the relative significance of nationalism and militarism in global conflict?

### Document 2

- **Type of Source:** Political speech
- **Author:** Vladimir Lenin
- **Date:** 1917

“The war has revealed not merely the ambitions of particular rulers but the whole corruption of the imperialist order. Workers and peasants are asked to slaughter one another so that ruling classes may preserve colonies, profits, and privileges. No durable peace can be expected from governments that have bound themselves to the defense of property and empire. The collapse of the old Russian regime shows that war abroad and oppression at home cannot be separated forever. When the burdens of military defeat, hunger, and misrule become unbearable, the people begin to understand that peace requires not negotiation among exhausted empires but the overthrow of those who profit from war itself. The revolution therefore arises not outside the world conflict but from its very contradictions, for imperial war has exposed the weakness of the state and opened the road to a new political order.”

**Historical Situation:** Lenin spoke during the Russian Revolution, linking war, imperialism, and internal collapse.

**Perspective / Limitation:** As a revolutionary leader, Lenin interprets conflict through Marxist ideology and may reduce complex causes to class and imperial structures.

**Use in Argument:** This document can be used to show how war, imperialism, and political instability combined to produce revolutionary conflict.

### Questions

1. How does Lenin connect international war to internal revolution?

2. What evidence in the document suggests that imperialism was a major cause of conflict?
3. How does this document help explain the significance of political crisis in global conflict?

### Document 3

- **Type of Source:** Economic analysis
- **Author:** International observer of the Great Depression
- **Date:** 1932

“The present crisis is not simply a matter of failing banks or declining markets; it is a crisis of confidence in the institutions that govern modern society. In country after country, unemployment has dissolved the habits of moderation upon which parliamentary systems depend. Citizens who once tolerated compromise now demand certainty, order, and immediate relief, and movements once dismissed as extremist increasingly present themselves as practical alternatives. Economic desperation has therefore become political dynamite. A society that cannot feed its workers or protect its savings is unlikely to preserve loyalty to constitutional forms for long. Unless recovery is achieved, the consequences will not remain confined to domestic unrest. Governments under pressure may turn outward, seeking distraction, resources, or prestige through expansion, while populations humiliated by hardship may welcome leaders who promise national rebirth through force. The depression thus threatens to transform economic collapse into international conflict.”

**Historical Situation:** The Great Depression destabilized governments and societies across the world.

**Perspective / Limitation:** The source strongly emphasizes economic causation and may understate ideological and diplomatic factors.

**Use in Argument:** This document can be used to argue that economic crisis was a highly significant cause of later global conflict.

### Questions

1. What is the author’s main argument about the effects of economic crisis?
2. What evidence in the document links economic hardship to political extremism?
3. How does this document help explain the significance of the Great Depression in causing global conflict?

### Document 4

- **Type of Source:** Government statement
- **Author:** Japanese official defending expansion
- **Date:** 1931

“Our empire cannot remain secure if it leaves its economic life exposed to uncertainty, disorder, and dependence upon the decisions of foreign powers. Population increases, industrial growth, and the unstable conditions on the continent require a firm policy equal to the demands of the age. Manchuria is not merely a neighboring territory but a region essential to the maintenance of order, the protection of commerce, and the future prosperity of our people. Those who criticize decisive action speak as though nations can survive on sentiment alone. The duty of a modern state is to secure the resources and strategic conditions necessary for endurance in a competitive world. Expansion under such circumstances is not rashness but prudence. A government that fails to provide security and opportunity for its people invites weakness at home and humiliation abroad.”

**Historical Situation:** Japan justified its expansion into Manchuria partly in terms of economic need and strategic security.

**Perspective / Limitation:** The source portrays imperial expansion as defensive necessity while ignoring Chinese sovereignty and the coercive nature of empire.

**Use in Argument:** This document can be used to show the significance of imperial ambition and resource competition in global conflict.

### Questions

1. How does the author justify Japanese expansion?
2. What evidence in the document links economics and imperial policy?
3. How does this document help explain imperialism as a cause of global conflict?

### Document 5

- **Type of Source:** Political speech
- **Author:** Adolf Hitler
- **Date:** 1937

“A nation of our strength cannot accept permanent confinement within boundaries fixed by the weakness and prejudice of others. The future belongs not to peoples content with decline, but to those prepared to secure space, resources, and unity by the force of their will. Germany was not restored merely to exist within the limits imposed after defeat. It was restored so that it might reclaim its rightful standing and guarantee the necessities of life for generations to come. Every people that intends greatness must free itself from arrangements that deny its vigor and condemn it to dependence. We do not seek conflict for its own sake, but neither can we permit our destiny to be dictated by those who fear the rise of a strong nation. History favors resolution, not hesitation, and a people that refuses bold action invites permanent inferiority.”

**Historical Situation:** Nazi Germany used revisionism, militarism, and expansionist ideology to justify aggressive policy in Europe.

**Perspective / Limitation:** The speech is propagandistic and portrays aggression as destiny and necessity while concealing the regime's destructive ambitions.

**Use in Argument:** This document can be used to argue that ideology and aggressive nationalism were among the most significant causes of World War II.

### Questions

1. What does the author suggest about the relationship between national strength and expansion?
2. What evidence in the document shows both revisionism and militarism?
3. How does this document help explain why ideology may be more significant than economics in causing conflict?

### Document 6

- **Type of Source:** Revolutionary reflection
- **Author:** Participant in the Mexican Revolution
- **Date:** 1920

“It would be a mistake to think that the violence of recent years came only from personal ambition or from the collapse of one old ruler. The deeper wound lay in a political system that had ceased to answer the needs of the people while preserving wealth, land, and authority in the hands of the few. Elections brought little trust, law offered little protection, and the countryside accumulated grievances long before the armies marched. Once the old order lost its ability to command obedience, every unresolved injustice returned at once: land hunger, regional rivalry, distrust of central authority, and anger at a state that seemed to govern without listening. Revolution was therefore not merely the product of one leader's fall, but of a social and political crisis that had been growing beneath the surface for years until conflict became, for many, the only remaining language of change.”

**Historical Situation:** The Mexican Revolution emerged from long-term political crisis and social inequality.

**Perspective / Limitation:** The source emphasizes internal structural causes and may understate the role of individual leaders or regional variation.

**Use in Argument:** This document can be used to show that political crisis and inequality were also major causes of twentieth-century conflict, not only international rivalry.

### Questions

1. What long-term causes of revolution does the author identify?

2. What evidence in the document suggests that conflict resulted from structural problems rather than one event?
3. How does this document help broaden the definition of global conflict beyond world wars alone?

### Document 7

- **Type of Source:** Postwar reflection on science and warfare
- **Author:** Scientist reflecting after World War II
- **Date:** 1946

“The recent war has demonstrated that scientific achievement, once celebrated chiefly as a promise of progress, can no longer be separated from questions of power and destruction. Advances in chemistry, physics, aviation, communications, and industry did not of themselves create hostility among nations, yet they transformed the scale on which hostility could be organized and expressed. States now command instruments that compress distance, accelerate mobilization, and magnify destruction beyond the imagination of previous generations. The bomb, like the bomber and the radio before it, reveals that modern conflict is not only fought with ideas and grievances but with capacities produced by laboratories, factories, and technical systems. It would therefore be simplistic to say that science causes war. Yet it would be equally mistaken to ignore the extent to which modern technology enlarges the possibilities of conflict and rewards governments able to integrate knowledge, production, and force.”

**Historical Situation:** After World War II, observers reflected on the role of science and technology in warfare.

**Perspective / Limitation:** The source carefully avoids claiming technology causes war directly, which may understate how technology can reshape political choices.

**Use in Argument:** This document can be used to qualify an argument by showing that technology may not be the root cause of conflict, but it greatly increases its scale and intensity.

### Questions

1. How does the author distinguish between causing war and enlarging war?
2. What evidence in the document shows the connection between science and global conflict?
3. How can this document be used to qualify an argument about the causes of conflict?

## Ranking Possible Causes of Global Conflict

Cause	Supporting Documents	Why it mattered
Nationalism / militarism	1, 5	Encouraged rivalry, expansion, and willingness to use force
Imperialism / competition for resources	2, 4, 5	Drove conquest, strategic rivalry, and anti-imperial reaction
Economic crisis	3, 4	Destabilized societies and increased support for radical solutions
Political instability / weak governments	2, 6	Helped revolutions, collapse, and violent challenges to old orders
Technology / science	7	Intensified the scale and reach of conflict once it began

## Short-Term Triggers vs Long-Term Causes

Type	Examples	How to use in argument
Long-term causes	nationalism, imperialism, political inequality, economic instability	Explain deep structures that made conflict more likely
Short-term catalysts	assassination at Sarajevo, stock market crash, invasion of Poland	Show how immediate events triggered broader tensions
Intensifying factors	alliance systems, propaganda, technology, total war	Explain why conflicts escalated and became global

## Historical Reasoning Section

### Change Over Time

From 1900 to the present, the causes of conflict changed in some important ways, even as older rivalries persisted. Imperial competition and nationalism remained powerful, but ideology and mass politics became more important in shaping twentieth-century conflict. Economic crises such as the Great Depression also had a larger global effect because economies were more interconnected. Science and technology did not always cause conflict directly, but they increasingly shaped how fast conflict spread and how destructive it became. In an argument, students can use change over time to show that while some causes were enduring, others became more significant in the modern era.

### Continuity Over Time

Many of the basic causes of conflict remained consistent across the period. States continued to seek power, prestige, territory, and security. Political leaders still used nationalism to mobilize support and justify confrontation. Empires and later nation-states alike tried to maintain or expand influence over land, labor, and resources. In an argument, students can use continuity to show that even the most modern conflicts often rested on older patterns of competition and state ambition.

## Comparison

Students can compare interstate wars such as World War I and World War II with revolutions such as those in Russia and Mexico. In both types of conflict, weak governments, inequality, and dissatisfaction played important roles, but interstate wars were more directly shaped by imperial rivalry, alliance politics, and international competition. Students can also compare the causes of World War I and World War II, noting that both involved nationalism and militarism, while World War II was more strongly shaped by fascist ideology and the economic crisis of the Great Depression. In an argument, comparison helps students evaluate relative significance rather than treating all conflicts the same way.

## Key Takeaways

- Global conflict after 1900 had multiple causes, but the most important often involved nationalism, imperialism, economic instability, ideology, and political weakness.
- Strong historical arguments do not just name causes; they rank them and explain how they interacted.
- Some causes were long-term structures, while others were short-term triggers or factors that intensified conflict.
- Technology often shaped the scale of conflict more than its original cause.
- A broad view of global conflict should include revolutions and internal political crises, not only world wars.

## DBQ Practice Section

### **Prompt:**

Evaluate the relative significance of nationalism, imperialism, economic crisis, and political instability in causing global conflict in the period 1900 to the present.

### **Task Instructions:**

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