

The Outbreak of War

If it was a Serbian who shot an Austrian, why did Germany, Russia, France and Britain become embroiled in a war? The European countries became involved in the war because of the alliances they had formed with each other - they had promised to support each other in the event of war and war was upon them.

Key dates

This list of dates shows how Europe slid into war after the murder of Franz Ferdinand.

1914 - The Build-Up to War

Date	Event
July 5th	The Austrian government asks the German government if it will support Austria in a war against Russia, if Russia supports Serbia. The Germans say they will support whatever the Austrian government decides to do - the so called 'blank cheque'.
July 23rd	The Austrian government sends the Serbian government an ultimatum.
July 25th	The Serbians accept all the conditions except one - that Austrian police should be allowed into Serbia.
July 28th	Austria-Hungary declares war on Serbia.
July 30th	The Russian army is mobilised.
August 1st	Germany declares war on Russia.
August 3rd	Germany declares war on France and, following the Schlieffen Plan, attacks Belgium.
August 4th	Britain keeps the promise made in a treaty of 1839 to defend Belgium, and declares war on Germany.

Source Analysis

Source A

The powder-keg was already full. The assassination of Archduke Ferdinand put the match to it by giving Austria the opportunity she was determined to take, of crushing Serbia in war. The Austrian ultimatum sent to Serbia (July 23) was followed within five days by a declaration of war against Serbia in spite of the conciliatory answer given by the Serbs.

The Austrians were determined on war and the Germans made no effort to stop them. Russian mobilisation (July 30) was followed by German mobilisation. Germany declared war on Russia (August 1) and on France (August 3). The German ultimatum to Belgium, demanding free passage for German troops through Belgium, brought in Britain on August 4, 1914.

PJ Larkin, European History for Certificate Classes (1965). (An old school pupils' examination revision book.)

Source B



'A Chain of Friendship'

The Schlieffen Plan

Germany had been preparing for war long before 1914. In fact, Germany had started drawing up a plan for war - the Schlieffen Plan - in 1897. It took nine years to finalise, but it was based on the theory that Germany would be at war with France and Russia at the same time. It did not prepare for many of the events that occurred in July and August 1914. It was based on the belief that, if the country went to war, Germany would be faced with a **war on two fronts** with France and Russia.



This map shows the war faced by Germany on two fronts

The plan assumed that **France was weak** and could be beaten quickly, and that **Russia** was much stronger, but would take **longer to mobilise** its army.

The plan began to go wrong on 30 July 1914, when Russia mobilised its army, but France did not. Germany was forced to invent a pretext to declare war on France (3 August 1914).

Things got worse when **Britain declared war on Germany** on 4 August 1914 because, in a Treaty of 1839, Britain had promised to defend Belgium.

Extra Facts

- The plan was the work of the German army chief-of-staff **Alfred von Schlieffen**.
- It took **nine years to devise** - it was started in 1897, presented in 1905, and revised in 1906.

- The plan imagined a huge hammer-blow at Paris, using 90 per cent of the German army, swinging down through Belgium and northern France, to **take out France in a quick, decisive campaign**.
- It was a **plan of attack** - for Germany, mobilisation and war were the same thing.
- It was Germany's **only** plan for war.
- It **did not** plan for a situation where Germany was at war with Russia, but not with France. When the German chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg asked: "Is the Fatherland in danger?", the German general Moltke declared: "Yes".
- In the event, **Russia took only ten days to mobilise**, and Moltke was forced to send some troops to the eastern front, which weakened the main attack on Paris.
- When the German army asked permission to go through Belgium on 2 August 1914, the Belgians refused, so the **German army had to fight its way through Belgium**. This slowed it down and tired the soldiers.
- Britain's decision to **uphold the 1839 Treaty with Belgium** amazed the Germans. "For a scrap of paper, Great Britain is going to make war?" said the amazed Bethmann-Hollweg.
- In the event, the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) arrived to resist the Germans, and held them up at the **Battle of Mons** on 23 August 1914. With his army exhausted and many of his best forces killed, Moltke was defeated at the battle of the Marne on 6-10 September 1914. "Sir, we have lost the war," he told the Kaiser.

Was Germany to Blame?

Immediately after the war, the **Treaty of Versailles blamed Germany** for 'all the loss and damage' of the war.

During the 1920s, however, Germans vigorously denied this, and - during the period of **appeasement** [**Appeasement**: *The policy of pacifying an aggressor through giving in to their demands, thus maintaining peace.*] in the 1930s - many people were prepared to **blame other factors**:

- Sydney Bradshaw Fay laid the emphasis on the **underlying tensions** of nationalism, imperialism, militarism and alliances.

- The British prime minister Lloyd George blamed the war on the **failure of the politicians** who, he said, lacked the ability to negotiate their way out of war. After the Second World War, historians were **less prepared to excuse Germany**. In the 1960s, the German historian Fritz Fischer argued that the German leaders had a 'will to war', that they wanted to expand German power, and they wanted the situation in Europe to deteriorate into war. This is the view still held by many historians today.