Alliance System, 1914

Source: From "A Fire Waiting to Be Lit: The Origins of World War I"

(https://teachdemocracy.org/common-core/world-war-i)

To address the rivalries for foreign investment and territory, the European powers began to join together in agreements, or alliances, which would guarantee them support from other nations in case of war.

Under the guidance of the German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, Germany and Austria-Hungary formed a military alliance in 1879. Three years later, Italy joined in what became the Triple Alliance. The terms of the alliance were, in brief, that if any member became involved in war with another great power, its allies would come to its aid by force of arms. The Triple Alliance lasted until the First World War.

In response to the Triple Alliance, the French decided to form its own alliance with Russia. Signed in 1894, the Franco-Russian Alliance provided that if one of the countries of the Triple Alliance (Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy) attacked France or Russia, its ally would attack the aggressor.

Britain meanwhile was increasingly concerned about Germany's push to acquire new colonies and secure foreign trade. Britain decided that it should forge greater ties with European powers. Britain and France had previously competed over who would control the Nile River as well as Egypt and Morocco. But in 1904, the governments settled their dispute. The French recognized the British occupation of Egypt, and the British recognized the French penetration of Morocco. Britain and France did not have a specific alliance and did not state clearly what would happen if they were attacked, but it was a close understanding that came to be known as the Entente Cordiale. Three years later, Britain and Russia put aside their differences over Persia and India. In an Anglo-Russian convention, the British recognized a Russian sphere of influence in the north of Persia and the Russians a British sphere in the south and the east. Thus, by 1907 the older Triple Alliance faced a new Triple Entente, composed of France, Russia, and Britain. The major European powers had divided into two opposing groups.

Naval Arms Race

Source: From “A Fire Waiting to Be Lit: The Origins of World War I”

(https://teachdemocracy.org/common-core/world-war-i)

Rivalry among the great powers grew during the early years of the 20th century. France was determined to restore its prestige and power and to regain the provinces of Alsace and Lorraine, which it had lost in the Franco-Prussian War. The kaiser in Germany, jealous of Great Britain's empire, implemented *Weltpolitik*, "world policy." The aim of *Weltpolitik* was to transform Germany into a global power through aggressive diplomacy, the acquisition of overseas colonies, and the development of a large navy. The kaiser believed that Germany's greatness depended on her becoming a naval power. "We have fought for a place in the sun," the kaiser said, and won it. "Our future is on the water." And Britain, which long had enjoyed naval supremacy, became alarmed at Germany's intentions.

Those intentions were clearly stated in the naval laws, which the German Reichstag passed beginning in 1898. The first Naval Law set a large number of ships to be constructed by 1904. A second Naval Law, passed in 1900, doubled the size of the fleet and made clear that the German navy would become a serious rival to the British Royal Navy. Britain depended on its navy to shield it from invasion. The British believed that the new plans for expanding the German navy were designed for a possible conflict with the British fleet.

From 1902 until war broke out in 1914, the British and Germans engaged in a naval arms race. The British designed a powerful new battleship, the *Dreadnought*, which it launched in 1906. The Germans immediately copied the *Dreadnought*, and the British Admiralty decided to maintain as many ships as Germany plus an additional six. The British also redistributed their ships so the biggest and most powerful ships were situated to fight the Germans. The effects of this race put a huge financial burden on both countries. But the naval race continued as the two powers struggled to dominate the seas.

Moroccan Crises

Source: From "A Fire Waiting to Be Lit: The Origins of World War I"

(https://teachdemocracy.org/common-core/world-war-i)

1st Crisis

One instance of the kaiser's aggressive diplomacy was in North Africa. In 1905, he disembarked from a German warship in the Moroccan port of Tangier and spoke in favor of Moroccan independence. Germany had no real interest in Morocco, but France did. The kaiser's goal was to support the sultan of Morocco and to impress others with Germany's power and prestige.

Germany called for an international conference to consider whether France's actions in Morocco had violated an international treaty. A conference took place the next year in the Spanish town of Algeciras to discuss issues of international law in the African colonies. But the outcome was not particularly positive for Germany, because Britain voted with France, as did Italy, and only Austria backed the kaiser.

2nd Crisis

The kaiser made a second try at demonstrating Germany's power in Morocco. In July 1911, a German gunboat, the *Panther*, arrived at Agadir, a large city on the Moroccan coast. The Germans stated that they had come to protect Morocco from French troops, which had entered the city of Fez to put down rebels. But Germany's true goal was to get access to territory in the Congo. Negotiations between France and Germany resulted in Germany's obtaining a small parcel of territory in the French Equatorial African colony of Middle Congo — a marshy area where sleeping sickness was widespread.

The kaiser's "gunboat diplomacy" damaged Germany's relations with Britain. Fearing Germany might meddle with its colonies, Britain drew closer to France, leading the two countries to make a naval agreement. Britain's Royal Navy promised to protect the northern coast of France from German attack, and France promised that her fleet in the western Mediterranean would protect British interests there.

Bosnian Crisis

Source: From "A Fire Waiting to Be Lit: The Origins of World War I"

(https://teachdemocracy.org/common-core/world-war-i)

The first crisis began in 1908. Russia was trying, as it had throughout history, to get control of the Turkish Straits which connect the Black and Aegean seas. Control of the straits would give the Russian navy access to the Aegean and the Mediterranean.

Russia entered talks with Austria-Hungary. Under the 1878 Treaty of Berlin, Austria occupied and administered the Ottoman Empire's provinces of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Austria wanted to annex the two provinces, which legally still belonged to the Ottoman Empire. Austria had invested heavily in these provinces and did not want them returned to the Ottoman Turks or become independent.

Russia thought Austria-Hungary had agreed to call an international conference. At the conference, Austria would support opening the Aegean to Russian warships. It would also back Russia in allowing Serbia to expand its borders (into areas controlled by the Ottomans) and in granting independence to Bulgaria, which was a self-ruling province in the Ottoman Empire. In return, Russia would support Austria's annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Austria never called for an international conference. Instead, in October 1908, Bulgaria declared its independence. The next day, Austria announced its annexation of Bosnia.

The Serbs erupted in a frenzy. The Serbian press lashed out at Austria, demonstrators filled the streets of Belgrade (the capital of Serbia), and Serbia mobilized its army. War became a real danger.

The Serbian government looked to Russia for support. Russians, eastern Slavs, saw themselves as natural allies of Serbia. Too weak to back Serbia militarily and pressured by Germany, the Russian government reluctantly agreed to the annexation. The Russian government felt humiliated by Germany, betrayed by Austria, and exposed as being willing to make a deal at Serbia's expense.

The crisis brought Germany and Austria closer, and military leaders from these two countries began to meet. The Germans committed themselves to Austria, and the Austrians began a more aggressive policy against the Slav threat.

Balkan Wars

Source: From "A Fire Waiting to Be Lit: The Origins of World War I"

(https://teachdemocracy.org/common-core/world-war-i)

War did break out in the Balkans in 1912 and again in 1913. In both wars, the Balkan states fought to divide up the parts of the Ottoman Empire located on the European continent. Serbia, Bulgaria, Montenegro, and Greece joined forces with support from Russia, and the first war ended with the Treaty of London in May 1913. But the countries that had fought together during the war still contested territory, and two months later, Bulgaria attacked its former allies, Serbia and Greece. Turkey joined the war as well. In August 1913 the second Balkan War ended with the Treaty of Bucharest.

As a result of the Balkan wars, the Ottoman Empire lost almost all its land in Europe. Greece, Serbia, Bulgaria, and Montenegro expanded their borders. The non-Slavic Balkan nation of Albania gained its independence. And Serbia and Russia (which had sided with Serbia) lost a key ally in Bulgaria (which became an ally of Austria).

Tension over the Balkans remained high. All the contestants still desired more land. The Ottoman Empire wanted its land back, and Austria-Hungary continued to control large populations of South Slavs.