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Causes of World War I

World War I, or the Great War, was the biggest war the Western world had ever seen. Many millions of soldiers and civilians were killed or wounded. New war technology escalated the war to new levels.

But how did this tremendous war get started?

Imagine a forest after it rains. Someone lights a match and drops it on the forest floor. It's quickly snuffed out by the damp air. Now imagine a forest during a drought. It's bone dry. Someone lights a match and drops it on the forest floor. What do you think will happen?

Just like a dry forest is primed for a fire, the conditions in Europe in 1914 were fit for a monumental conflict.

One major cause of the war was imperialism—that's when a country takes control of other territories to gain wealth and power. Before World War I, many European countries were fighting to control territory on other continents. This created an atmosphere of competition and confrontation. Countries were also caught up in nationalism, each wanting to prove its superiority.

Another major cause of the war: militarism. In the early 20th century, the Industrial Revolution led to technological advances throughout Europe, including more efficient manufacturing of tools, weapons, and airplanes. Countries like Great Britain and Germany were locked in an unofficial arms race—competing to develop a stockpile of military technology. Safe to say, tensions were high between nations.

Alliances between countries also played a role in escalating the war. That may seem counterintuitive...I'll explain. See, several European countries had made mutual defense agreements—meaning if one country was attacked, its allies would come in to defend it. Because of these promises, World War I went from a war between just two countries—Serbia and Austria-Hungary—to a global conflict. Once Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia, Russia jumped in to defend Serbia. Then Germany declared war on Russia. Then France declared war on Germany and Austria-Hungary. Then Germany attacked France, so Great Britain

stepped in. Then Japan came in to defend Great Britain. Later, Italy and the US would join the war, as well.

Now that you understand the conditions before the war, let's talk about that event that "lit the match." In June of 1914, Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated. Ferdinand was in line to become king of Austria-Hungary, which controlled Bosnia. Many Bosnians wanted out of Austria. They wanted to either form their own independent country or join Serbia. Ferdinand was visiting Bosnia when a Serbian nationalist shot and killed him. Austria-Hungary blamed the Serbian government for the assassination and soon declared war.

Clearly, there wasn't just one cause of World War I. A confluence of events created the atmosphere for this global conflict: imperialism, nationalism, militarism, and complex alliances. Franz Ferdinand's assassination was the spark that got the whole war going. Four years later, almost 40 million people were dead or wounded, and the global political, economic, and social climate had drastically shifted.

What lessons do you think the world has learned from this dark era of history?