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The alliance system was the main cause of the outbreak of a World War in 1914. To what extent do you agree?

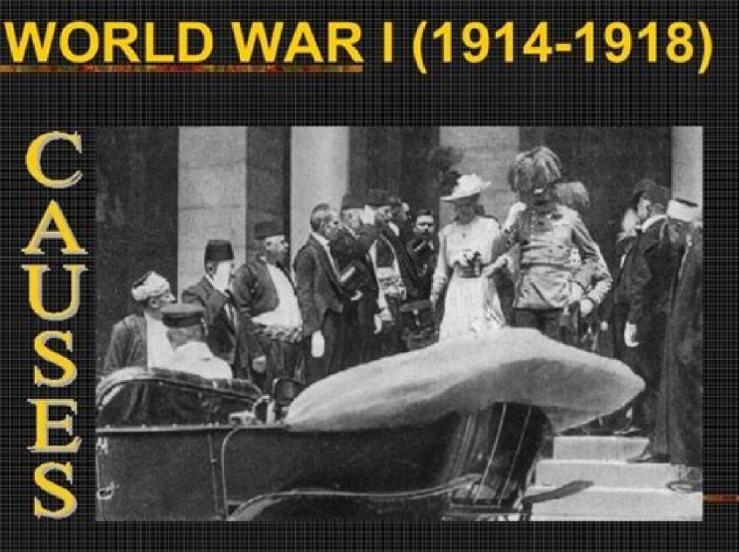
The outbreak of the First World War in 1914 was due to a combination of causes which were both long term and short term. Militarism, imperialism, nationalism, and the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand. This essay will consider the extent to which the alliance system was the most significant of these causes, and more specifically, the way in which the alliance system was linked to the other causes. It will be argued that the alliance system, while a key precipitating factor, was neither the most significant cause nor the trigger for war; however, it was arguably the factor which created a war on such a scale - which created the first 'World War'.

The alliance system caused tension in Europe for several reasons. Firstly, by setting up two rival teams in the Triple Entente of 1907 (Britain, France, and Russia) and the Triple Alliance of 1882 (Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy) tension began. Furthermore, the 'spiral' of these alliance groups was very aggressive - the Triple Alliance was explicitly set up in opposition to the Triple Entente; these two groups were decidedly not friendly. This rivalry naturally led to tension and conflict, and it is through this conflict and competition that the alliance system was a contributing factor to the outbreak of war in 1914.

Alliances also helped to spread and escalate the war. When the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand (June 1914) caused Austria-Hungary to declare war on Serbia (July 1914), this sparked a domino effect which led to the majority of Europe - and soon the world - being pulled into a conflict which would otherwise have been an internal war for the Austria-Hungarian Empire. The first to join was Russia, who viewed Austria-Hungary as they would intervene to protect Serbia in the case of aggression, because the Russian and Serbian people had common Slavic ties in their ancestry. Germany, because of their strategy 'The Schlieffen Plan' and unconditional 'Blank cheque' support of Austria-Hungary, decided to attack preemptively, and declared war on both France and Russia, in order to attack France, Germany invaded through Belgium, which to have caused Britain (proving the entire British Empire) to declare war on Germany, and complete the spiral of the war. After the 'Blank cheque' or 'Blank check' was signed, the agreement of the 'alliance system' of the Triple Entente and Triple Alliance. The Russo-Serbian alliance was a bilateral agreement based upon national identity, rather than a strategic alliance as those of the Triple Alliance. Similarly, the British involvement to protect Belgium was not part of the Triple Entente. This, whilst alliances certainly added to European tension and escalated the war in subsequent steps, we cannot assign full responsibility to the alliance system for the outbreak of the war.

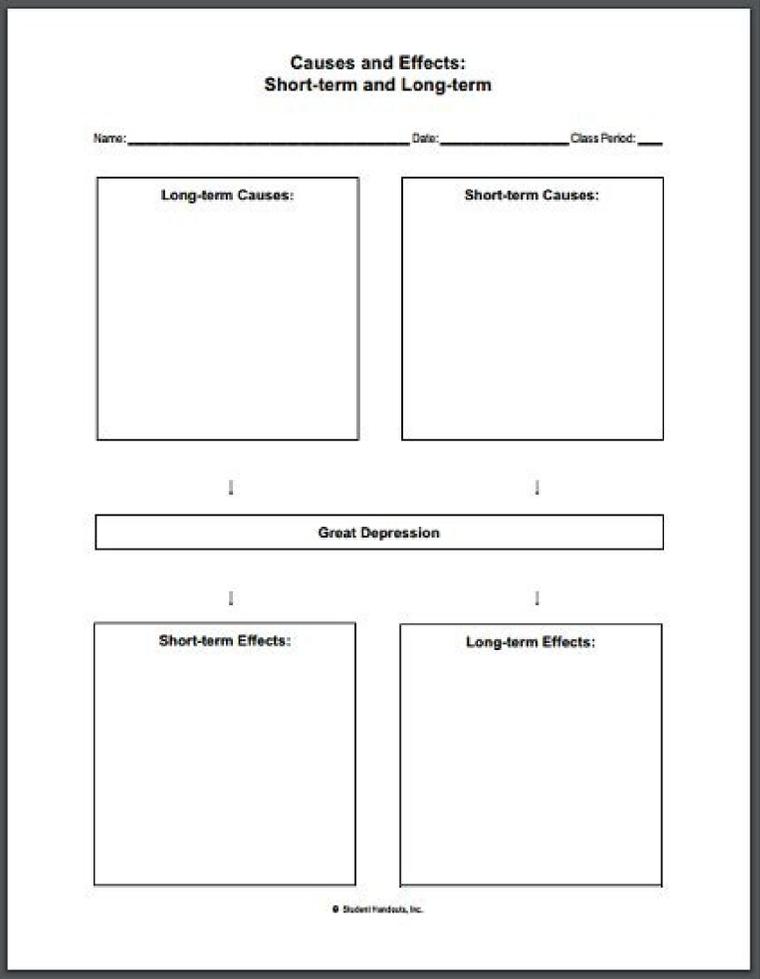
Regarding other causes, it is militarism which links most strongly to the alliance system. The arms race was arguably the primary factor for having these alliance systems in the first place - the arms race led to the changing alliances and nations specific rivalries and full on competition. One example of this was the Anglo-German Arms Race, competing over the building of the new ironclad warships: the British government held a long standing policy that their navy had to be stronger than the next two most powerful combined (grouped by) competitors, another cause, and this was under significant threat when the Germans started escalating their military expansion. Furthermore, militarism represented a belief by many in governments that war was good for a country - war was always the first recourse in the event of a dispute, and diplomacy was seen as weak and ineffective. As such, not only did militarism create the conditions for a conflict through military build up in the alliance nations, militarism also made the diplomatic route more likely to be rejected in any dispute. Therefore, militarism can be seen as a clear contributing factor to the outbreak of the war, although not enough on its own to spark the war.

Another cause of the war was imperialism - the establishment of, and competition between, overseas empires and colonies by European states. Britain and France were significant colonial powers. Significantly, the scramble for Africa in the 19<sup>th</sup> century left Britain and France as the



3. The Alliance System

- Increasing national rivalries within and beyond Europe resulted in nations forming two rival alliances.
- From 1907 onwards, the major powers were all members of one of these two rival power blocs.
- Britain joined with Russia and France in an alliance known as the Triple Entente.
- While Germany was linked with Austria-Hungary and Italy in the Triple Alliance.
- These agreements increased nations' sense of strength and protection and fostered the fear and mistrust of the nations that did not belong to them.
- There was therefore two opposed teams ready to declare war on each other when the moment arose.





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World War I began in June of 1914, and is considered to have five major causes that led to the outbreak of the war. These five causes include the four long-term causes (militarism, alliances, imperialism and nationalism) discussed in this reading and one short-term cause (the assassination of Franz Ferdinand). The four long-term causes each occurred in the years and decades before the actual outbreak of World War I, and all combined to set the stage for war in 1914. Most people think of these as the MAIN causes of World War I as an easy to remember acronym. The first long-term cause of World War I is militarism. Militarism can best be understood as the buildup or expansion of the ability of a country's military to wage war. In the decades before World War I many European countries began to practice militarism and worked to expand and strengthen their military forces. For example, there was an intense arms race and naval race between several European nations in the buildup to World War I. Specifically, France and Germany were heavily involved in an arms race in which each country doubled their armies between 1870 and 1914. Both nations had a history of war against each other and their rivalry caused them to expand their military forces. At the outbreak of fighting in 1914, France had approximately 4 million soldiers while Germany had over 4.5 million. This arms race showed the distrust between the nations of Europe and when war did break out in 1914 it allowed the countries to go to war more easily. In addition to the arms race, there was also a competitive naval race between Britain and Germany in the years leading up to World War I. Britain had the largest navy in the world at the time, which it needed to maintain its vast colonial empire. Germany viewed the British navy as a threat and sought to develop its own navy to match the powerful British navy. Mostly Germany needed a strong navy to challenge British ships in the North Sea. The North Sea was Germany's only coastal access but was difficult for Germany since the North Sea was connected to Britain and the British navy dominated the area. Also related to the naval race was the development of the dreadnought. Britain developed and launched the dreadnought in 1906 which was the first battleship to be developed in the 20th century. The British dreadnought was notable for having larger caliber guns and for being faster on open water than any other earlier battleships. In response, Germany developed its own version of the dreadnought and worked to challenge the power of the British. By the outbreak of war in 1914, Britain had 29 dreadnoughts and Germany had 17. In general, militarism showed the rivalry that existed between the nation of Europe in the years for the outbreak of World War I. Also, militarism created the large forces that easily allowed the European nations to go to war in 1914. If they had not built such large armies then the war may not have been so easy to begin and so devastating. Causes of World War I Infographic (Click to Enlarge) The second long-term cause of World War I was the system of alliances that existed in the years before the outbreak of war in 1914. When World War I began Europe divided between two separate alliance systems. Britain, France and Russia made up the Triple Entente while Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy made up the Triple Alliance. Both sets of alliances were created in the years and decades before World War I between the partnering countries. The assassination of Austro-Hungarian archduke Franz Ferdinand and the resulting crisis between Serbia and the Austro-Hungarian Empire caused each system of alliances to enact and World War I began. Alliance Systems Map of World War I (Click to Enlarge) American political cartoon titled 'Chain of Friendship'. To understand how the system of alliances led to the start of World War I, we first need to understand the series of events that unfolded after the assassination of Franz Ferdinand in June of 1914. Immediately after the assassination, which was carried out by a Serbian nationalist organization called the Black Hand, Austria-Hungary blamed Serbia and began to threaten Serbia. In response, Russia came to the defense of Serbia. Russia did this as part of its larger movement for Pan-Slavism. Pan-Slavism was the theory that supported the promotion of all Slavic people of which Russians and Serbians were both. As such, Russia wanted to support the Serbians against Austro-Hungarian aggression because Russia viewed Serbians as sharing a similar ethnic heritage. After Russia came to the defense of Serbia, Germany pledged its support to Austria-Hungary in the form of a 'blank check', meaning Germany was offering Austria-Hungary its unlimited support. This act by Germany caused an alliance between Russia and France to take effect and both France and Britain were pulled into the conflict in support of Russia. Italy was then also pulled into the conflict but on the side of the Triple Entente and fought extensively against the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the Alp Mountains. Italy didn't enter the fighting until a year after World War I began, but ultimately entered on the side of the Triple Entente after a period of secret negotiations. What had begun as a conflict between Austria-Hungary and Serbia had expanded to include all of the major powers in Europe. Ultimately, the alliance systems that existed before the start of World War I obligated countries to go to war in defense of their allies. This obligation is how countries such as Britain, France, Germany and Italy were pulled into the conflict. The third main cause of World War I was European imperialism that occurred in the 1800's and early 1900's before World War I erupted in 1914. Imperialism is understood as a process in which a country overtakes another country or region's political, economic or social life. Imperialism was carried out by the powerful European nations against the rest of world in the decades before World War I began. For example, in the 19th century European nations carried out massive campaigns of imperialism against the regions of Africa in an event known as the Scramble for Africa. The Scramble for Africa led to the start of World War I because it increased rivalry between the European nations as they fought against each other for territory in Africa and control over different regions. For example, in 1884, German leader Otto von Bismarck called the Berlin Conference which had the European powers meet to discuss the division of Africa into regions controlled by the European nations. The purpose of the meeting was to avoid starting a major European conflict and to lessen tensions because the Scramble for Africa was leading to an intense rivalry and distrust between the European powers. The peace created at the Berlin Conference did not last as the rivalry between the European powers increased as they approached 1914. Moroccan Crisis For instance, Britain and France were the two Europeans nations that had control over the largest regions of Africa during the Scramble for Africa and this caused tension with Germany. Germany was angry that it lacked the colonies in Africa that both Britain and France had and resented their general role in Africa. This anger by Germany would lead to the two Moroccan Crises that occurred before World War I. Both crises occurred in the ten years before the outbreak of World War I and both involved France trying to gain control over Morocco while Germany worked to prevent France. For example, the Second Moroccan Crisis, which occurred in 1911, began when Germany sent its warship (Panther) to Agadir, Morocco in July of that year. The incident enraged the French who were considered to have a major interest in the region and both countries began threatening each other and talking of war. While the two sides would eventually end the crisis through negotiations it still showed the level of rivalry and tensions that imperialism in Africa caused among the European nations. Ultimately, these tensions led to a sense of anger and distrust among the European powers that helped to set the stage for war in 1914. The fourth and final long-term cause of World War I was the growth of nationalism that occurred in Europe in the decades before World War I and the tensions it caused. Nationalism is best understood as when a group of people identify with each other and display a loyalty to their nation or country. Nationalism grows when people share similar beliefs, values, ethnic heritage, relationship to land, language, culture and customs. For example, both Germany and Italy unified from many separated kingdom states into unified nation-states in the late 1800's. These separate kingdoms unified as the people in those regions began to identify with each other and as nationalism swept across the people of Europe. Nationalism was a major cause of World War I because it caused tensions and unrest to grow in certain parts of Europe. For example, the Austro-Hungarian Empire was not made up of one single nation, but rather consisted of many different groups. Many of these groups sought to have control over themselves and wanted sovereignty from the rule of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. This created a great deal of unrest in the empire. This was especially apparent in the Balkans, which is a region in Southeast Europe that contains many different nation-states. In the years before World War I, the Balkans was under intense nationalistic tensions. This was primarily due to the rise of nationalism in Europe and the influence of Austria-Hungary in the region. The Austro-Hungary Empire extended into the Balkans on its southern borders and in the years before World War I it attempted to extend its control over the region. Many historians now refer to the nationalistic tensions that were created in the region as a 'powder keg', meaning that the tensions were so extreme that they were like a bomb ready to explode at any moment. Ultimately, the assassination of Austro-Hungarian archduke Franz Ferdinand in June of 1914 was the 'spark' that lit the match of the Balkans Powder Keg and plunged Europe into World War I. Nationalism as a movement in Europe in the years before World War I, created the tensions necessary for a small event like the assassination of Franz Ferdinand to explode into the worldwide conflict that it became. Balkan Powder Keg Quote by Austro-Hungarian Emperor Franz Joseph I on the start of World War I.

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