

# Background to War

Although a single event sparked the beginning of World War I, its causes had existed for many years. These causes were nationalism, imperialism, and militarism.

Nationalism is the pride that people feel for their country. It is also the desire for independence. In the years leading up to World War I, nationalistic feelings caused intense rivalries and hatred to develop among nations in Europe. France feared and distrusted Germany. Austria-Hungary controlled land that Serbia wanted. Russia desired territory belonging to the Turkish Ottoman Empire (now Turkey). Germany wanted to build a railroad from Berlin to Baghdad (in what is now the nation of Iraq), and Great Britain feared that German intrusion would threaten British control of the Suez Canal. In addition to these rivalries, many groups desired independence. Slavs, Czechs, and others sought to free themselves from Austria-Hungary. Poles, Finns, and Latvians were among those who were unhappy under Russian rule. Bulgarians, Greeks, Albanians, and others had already broken away from Turkish rule before the war began. Nationalism and rivalry in the southern part of Europe known as the Balkans was so intense that this area was referred to as the "powder keg of Europe."

Another cause of World War I was imperialism, the policy in which strong, industrialized nations take control of weaker, unindustrialized areas. There was great competition among European nations to acquire colonies and trading rights in Africa, China, and the Middle East. Much of the land in Africa and the Middle East was divided among the nations of Europe, and several countries sought to control areas of China.

Militarism, also a cause of World War I, resulted from nationalism and imperialism. Nations competed to build the strongest armies and navies, and by 1914 Europe had become an armed camp. At this point, a highly emotional incident was all it would take to plunge the continent into war.