The immediate trigger of World War I was the assassination of the heir to the throne of the Austro-Hungarian Empire on 28 June 1914. Five weeks later the great powers of Europe, along with the countries of their empires and some other small nations, were at war. When the war began, most people thought that it would be over within a few months. Instead it raged for four years, causing great destruction and unimagined suffering. Such conflicts rarely have one simple cause. To understand how and why the Great War happened we need to look well beyond the event that triggered the fighting.

Glorifying war

Today we know that war is always terrible, cruel and destructive, and that it often has unforeseen consequences. However, most people did not understand this in early 1914. At school and in popular books, newspapers and magazines war was often presented as a heroic adventure. Most people thought of wars as short, exciting, noble and glorious. At the same time, there was an arms race in Europe. Between 1870 and 1914 the great powers increased their military spending by 300 per cent and all the continental European powers adopted conscription. Some historians have described Europe in 1914 as a powder keg waiting for a spark to ignite an explosion.
The cause of anxiety now in public opinion here as regards Germany arises entirely from the question of the German naval expenditure . . . if she had a fleet bigger than the British fleet, obviously she could not only defeat us at sea, but could be in London in a very short time with her army.

**Long-term tensions**

As you learned in the chapter 1 Overview, imperialism and nationalism had caused international tensions and conflicts long before 1914. Fear and suspicion of their rivals drove nations to seek security through alliances with others. Leaders came to believe that their countries would be safer if they could rely on others to come to their aid if ever they were threatened. But such alliances could also drag countries into conflicts.

**Germany’s alliances**

From the early 1870s Germany sought an alliance with Austria–Hungary and Russia. This was because the German states had taken two provinces — Alsace and Lorraine — from France during war in 1870, and Germany feared that France would want revenge. But such an alliance could not last because Austria–Hungary and Russia had competing interests. In 1879 Germany created the Dual Alliance, under which Germany and Austria–Hungary agreed that each would help the other if either was attacked by Russia. This accord became the Triple Alliance when Italy joined in 1882. At the same time, Germany attempted to remain friendly with Britain and to mend relations with Russia.

**France finds allies**

From 1888 Germany’s foreign policy took a new direction. When Germany failed to renew a treaty with Russia in 1890, France found an ally in Russia. In the 1894 Franco-Russian Alliance each agreed to help the other if attacked by Germany. The new German ruler, Kaiser Wilhelm II, wanted to create a colonial empire and took steps to build up the German navy. This raised concerns in Britain, whose own empire depended on the Royal Navy’s absolute superiority over any rival. Alarmed by Germany’s move, Britain signed the Entente Cordiale with France in 1904. When Britain and Russia settled their differences in 1907, Britain, France and Russia linked up in the Triple Entente.

Conflicting French and German interests in North Africa and conflicting Russian and Austrian interests in the Balkans led to increased tensions. However, it was in the Balkans that these tensions would erupt into war.

**The Balkans powder keg**

Nationalism was an especially strong force in Europe’s Balkan peninsula, where several national groups had won their independence from the Turkish Ottoman Empire since the 1820s. This current alarmed the military leaders of Austria–Hungary, who feared that the Austro-Hungarian Empire could also be infected by
national minorities seeking independence. The main problem was tension between Austria and Serbia, the most powerful of the independent Balkan nations.

Serbia was a Slavic nation. Serbian nationalists wanted other Slavic peoples within the Austro-Hungarian Empire to unite with it in a South Slav kingdom. Many Serbs were furious when, in 1908, Austria annexed two Turkish Balkan provinces, Bosnia and Herzegovina, where Serbs made up much of the population. By 1914 Serbia saw Austria as the main obstacle to its expansion. For its part, Austria viewed Serbia as a danger to its empire’s continued existence. Austria–Hungary was much more powerful than Serbia, but Serbia had the backing of Russia, which portrayed itself as the champion of fellow Orthodox Christian Slavs.

Countdown to war
On 28 June 1914, during an official visit to the Bosnian town of Sarajevo, the heir to the Austrian throne, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, and his wife, the Duchess Sophie, were fatally shot. Their killer was Gavrilo Princip, a 19-year-old Bosnian Serb. Princip and his fellow assassins belonged to an extreme Serbian nationalist group, Young Bosnia. Its aim was to see Bosnia united with Serbia. They were armed and assisted by Danilo Ilic, a member of the Black Hand, a secret society directed by the head of Serbian military intelligence.

Events soon spiralled out of control. Austria now had an excuse to crush Serbia but needed to be sure of Germany’s backing. Germany gave Austria a guarantee of military support and, on 23 July, Austria presented Serbia with an ultimatum. Austria knew that Serbia could never accept

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Did you know?

The assassins did not know that Archduke Franz Ferdinand was strongly opposed to any war against Serbia and wanted political reform in the Austro-Hungarian Empire with more rights for its subjects.

Source 6
This illustration appeared in a French magazine shortly after the assassination. The caption read: ‘The assassination of the Archduke, Austrian heir, and the Duchess, his wife, in Sarajevo’.

Source 7
From a letter written in 1918 by the youngest of the assassins, 17-year-old Vaso Cubrilovic, to his sisters. Because he was under 20, Cubrilovic was spared the death penalty but sentenced to 16 years’ imprisonment.

I shall write as much as I remember about the assassination. I first thought about it in October 1913 in Tuzla, incensed by the fights we had with our teachers, the mistreatment of Serbian students, and the general situation in Bosnia. I thought I’d rather kill the one person who’d really harmed our people than fight in another war for Serbia. All I’d achieve in a war is to kill a couple of innocent soldiers, while these gentlemen who were responsible for it never come anywhere near the war itself...

Ilic...told me that there would be three others, apart from us three, and that Serbian officers were supplying the weapons. I asked if the Serbian government knew about it. He said no...
conscription: compulsory enlistment of citizens to serve in the armed forces
Slavic: belonging to the Slavs (a language group including Russians, Serbs and other Central and Eastern European peoples)
ultimatum: a final set of demands or terms backed by a threat

Chapter 8: World War I (1914–1918)

## EXPLANATION AND COMMUNICATION
1. Create a mind map of the long-term causes of World War I.
2. Explain why Austria–Hungary’s military leaders wanted a war with Serbia (refer to Source 4 in your explanation).

## ANALYSIS AND USE OF SOURCES
3. Using Source 1, list the members of the two rival European alliances.
4. Use Sources 2 and 3 and your own knowledge to explain:
   a. why Britain was anxious about Germany’s naval build-up
   b. why Britain wanted its navy to be able to match those of any two enemies.
5. Referring to Sources 5 and 6, explain why the assassination of the Austrian archduke was so significant.
6. Using Source 8, describe the steps by which a local conflict in the Balkans became a world war.

## PERSPECTIVES AND INTERPRETATIONS
7. Read Source 7. According to his letter:
   a. How did Vaso Cubrilovic justify his involvement in the assassination?
   b. Do you think he was justified? Give reasons for your answer.
   c. Besides Young Bosnia, what organisation was involved in the assassination plot?
   d. Was the Serbian government responsible?
8. Do you think Austria was justified in declaring war?
9. How else could the situation have been resolved?

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Russia began to mobilise its forces to support Serbia on 30 July, so Germany declared war on Russia on 1 August. After France declared it would stand by its Russian ally, on 3 August Germany declared war on France. As you can see from Source 8, Russia, Germany, France, Belgium, Britain and their empires were drawn rapidly into a world war.

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**Students workbook 8.1**

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Serbia accepted many of the demands and offered to discuss others, but Austria proceeded to declare war on 28 July. All the terms of the ultimatum, especially its demand that Austrian troops be allowed to track down Serb terrorists inside Serbia.

### War begins
Serbia accepted many of the demands and offered to discuss others, but Austria proceeded to declare war on 28 July. Russia began to mobilise its forces to support Serbia on 30 July, so Germany declared war on Russia on 1 August. After France declared it would stand by its Russian ally, on 3 August Germany declared war on France. As you can see from Source 8, Russia, Germany, France, Belgium, Britain and their empires were drawn rapidly into a world war.