The Origins of the First World War

- 28th June 1914, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the throne of Austria-Hungary, assassinated

The European powers

**Germany**: Europe’s strongest power, based on industrial strength and excellent army

**France**: made rapid recovery after its defeat in the Franco-Prussian war (1870-1). By 1890 had similar sized army to Germany and a navy second only to that of Britain, large overseas empire, dreamed of recovering Alsace-Lorraine, concerned with winning allies to provide some security against Germany

**Russia**: population twice of Germany, army was largest in Europe. Weak in industry

**Austria-Hungary**: no great economic strength, only European power without overseas empire

**Britain**: empire was over 20% of the world’s land surface, had the world’s strongest navy; army was small, only European power that did not have conscription

**Italy**: weakest of the great powers, had ambitions in Africa and the Mediterranean

Colonial Rivalry

- 1870-1900, Britain added 4.25 million square miles and 26 million people
- Russia added 0.5 square miles and 6.5 million people
- Germany acquired a new empire of 1 million square miles and 13 million people
- Belgium and Italy acquired territory in Africa

What caused the “New imperialism”?

**Economic Motivation**

- Hobson argued that the “disastrous folly” of imperialism was the result of certain interests—armament firms, big business, bankers—pursuing the growth of empire for their own selfish ends
- The Russian revolutionary Lenin claimed that imperialism arose out of modern capitalism which had become dominated by huge combines
- Farmer argues that the export of capital seems to have had little connection with imperial expansion. France, e.g. had less than 7% of her foreign capital in her colonies
- In the late 19th Century, the search for markets became increasingly competitive, most countries had high tariff protecting their trade. Britain feared it might be shut out of potential markets if other countries acquired too much colonies. However, European countries obtained only a fraction of their raw materials from their colonies and colonial trade was a small part of their total foreign commerce
- Nevertheless, at the time most assumed there would be future economic advantages in colonies

**Nationalism**

- Imperialism is closely linked to national prestige
- Colonies were seen as status symbols
- Governments, elites, nationalistic masses were enthusiastic about colonies
- Many imperialists were Social Darwinists
- Countries were in a perpetual struggle for existence: only the strongest and “fittest” survived

**Humanitarian Concerns**

- Many Europeans believed it was the duty of the “advanced’ people to bring civilization to those less fortunate
- About 40,000 Catholic and 20,000 Protestant missionaries went to Asia and Africa with the aim of Christianizing and civilizing

**Accident**
- The view that he might have restrained German action by making it clear that Britain would support France
- German leaders expected and were not too concerned about British intervention
- British Expeditionary Force was only 150,000 strong, unlikely to disrupt the Schlieffen Plan

**Serbian Responsibility**
- Serbia’s aggressive expansionism unsettled the Balkans
- The Serbian government could have accepted Austrian ultimatum

**CONC:** it seemed unlikely that any country planned or wanted a war. Fischer’s view: the war was deliberately begun by Germany – unconvincing Germany was more to blame than ay other power. Opportunism (blank cheque)

**What were the main causes of the war?**

**How important was the Balkan situation?**
- A-H and Russia's conflict Balkan ambitions had heightened tensions
- By 1914, the crucial issue was the conflict between Austria and Serbia
- Serbian nationalism was potential threat to the Habsburg Empire
- Serbia’s sense of grievance at the Austrian annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina was matched by Austrian alarm at Serbia’s expansion as a result of the Balkan Wars
- WWI began as a fight for the future of the Balkans
- A-H and Germany made a big for control: Russia resolved to stop them

**How important was the alliance system?**
- Reflection of insecurity and a contribution
- Alliance system reduced the flexibility of the great powers' response to a crisis
- Germany’s lack of a flexible response in 1914 ensured that its reply to a threat from Russia was to invade France
- However, the alliance system is not as rigid: August 1914, Italy refused to support her partners in the Triple Alliance
- The Triple Entente was not even an alliance, Britain had no precise commitments
- 1914, no one knew for certain what Britain’s response to the crisis would be
- Until Germany invaded Belgium, the British Cabinet was deeply divided over Britain’s course of action
- Many historians after 1914 argued that the alliance system made war inevitable, many contemporaries believed that by creating a balance of power, it helped maintained peace

**How important was “international anarchy”?**
- After 1918, politicians believed that the existence of nation states, pursuing their own interests rather than collaborating in the interests of Europe as a whole
- However, “international anarchy” had been a fact of life in European affairs since 1871, during which time Europe had enjoyed 40 years of peace
- Old-style diplomacy had partitioned Africa peacefully and resolved the situation in China
- Pre-1914 European powers tended to act in “concert” to aver the threat to peace
- There was a tradition of responding to crises by convening international conferences to seek collective solutions
- The breakdown of the “concert” in 1914 was a symptom than a cause of the growing tension

**How important was the Arms Race?**
- It inevitably led to war. However, if arms races led to war, the world would not have survived the Cold War
- Arguably the wealth of arms in Europe might have act as a deterrent, most powers did not increase the size of their armies until after 1912. However, there is no doubt that Russia’s army reforms caused great anxiety in Germany