BACKGROUND

World War I was one of the first events in modern history that was both concentrated in time and global in scope. And it was a hugely important turning point in world history. Consider the world scene in 1914, the year the war broke out.

Europe was divided into a number of sovereign nation-states, but it still constituted a single cultural community in some respects. Even though there were many different church denominations, Christianity gave Europeans some generally shared ideas about the supernatural, morality, and destiny. European states had different sorts of governments. France and Portugal were the only republics. Most countries were monarchies, many of them constitutional monarchies such as Great Britain, some autocracies such as Russia. People could travel quite easily from one European country to another, and no one had to show a passport. People traveled widely within Europe, especially using the railway networks that linked most countries together. Europeans spoke a variety of languages, no common one. But French served as a language of diplomacy and scholarly exchange throughout Europe.

Everyday culture was quite similar all across Europe, especially in the cities. There, people tended to dress alike, eat many of the same foods, and enjoy the same art and music. The unity of civilization in Europe might be symbolized by the architecture of three sorts of public buildings. One was the railway station, which represented European communication and industry. The second was the town hall, which typified public participation in government. The third was the opera house, which symbolized common culture in the fine arts. These types of structures looked quite alike wherever one traveled in Europe.

In 1914, the industrial nation-states of Europe dominated most of the world. Three powers—Britain, France, and Germany—controlled about 80 percent of the world’s inhabited surface. Those three powers also possessed about half of the world’s industrial might. Their merchants controlled half the world’s international trade.

So why did European countries make devastating war on one another? Both the economic power of the countries of Europe and their rivalry for world influence produced serious divisions and mutual suspicions among them—even though their affluent populations attended the same operas. National groups that did not have their own states, or not one that included the territories they wanted, expressed their nationalism loudly. These groups were concentrated in eastern Europe: Poles, Ukrainians, Croatians, Serbs, Czechs, and others. Tensions were growing between the sovereign states. There was general agreement in the early twentieth century that boundaries in Europe were to be regarded as fixed. One state was not supposed to covet the territory of other states.

Within Europe an ominous arms race was picking up. Germany, which became a unified sovereign state in 1871, was a new power on the scene. Germany’s rapid rise as an industrial and military power caused alarm, especially for France and Britain. All the European powers informally agreed that whenever a conflict threatened to break out between two of them, the powers would gang up on the side of the underdog and the crisis would be defused that way. But Europe had no regular machinery for settling international disputes. Neither the League of Nations nor the United Nations yet existed.
Shifts and adjustments in the balance of power ended, and Europe divided into two solid alliance blocks: Germany and Austria-Hungary on one side, Britain, France, and Russia on the other.

The incident that precipitated World War I was in itself a small one: the Archduke Francis Ferdinand, who was the heir to the throne of Austria-Hungary, was traveling in the town of Sarajevo on June 28, 1914. While his carriage was driving through the streets, a Serbian terrorist shot him. Serbian revolutionaries regarded Austria as the special enemy of the little country of Serbia. From this incident unrolled a series of events that nobody managed to control and that led directly to the outbreak of the war in August 1914. Austria made demands on Serbia. Russia was an ally of Serbia and therefore started mobilizing its army. Germany then mobilized as well because it felt it had to stand by Austria, its ally, against Russia. Finally, France and Britain, Russia's allies, mobilized too. Germany invaded France and tried to knock it out of the war fast, but the army got bogged down in Belgium and northeastern France. This is where the trench lines were dug. This was the Western Front. The rigid alliance system made it almost inevitable that a local quarrel could become a European war, and that is what happened. And because of the involvement of European countries with their own colonies and with other countries in Africa, Asia, and America, it became a world war. Japan, China, Italy, and the US all came into the war eventually on the Allied side. Turkey joined the Central Powers. Before the war was over, more than thirty countries with a combined population of 1.4 billion people were involved.

Scholars disagree on the causes of World War I. What were the forces at play? Let's examine:

**NATIONALISM**
Those who believe that nationalism was the main cause of World War I think that it was propelled by such factors as the desire of Slavic peoples to free themselves from the rule of the Austro-Hungarian empire, and the desire of Austria-Hungary, in turn, to crush rising spirits of nationalism among ethnic groups within the empire. Serbian nationalists were especially militant, Serbs within the empire demanding unification with the small Kingdom of Serbia. In the Middle East, nationalists in Arabic-speaking lands sought independence from the Ottoman Turkish empire. Nationalist groups in Georgia, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, and Poland called for separation from the Russian empire. Russia also promoted Pan-Slavism in the Balkans, encouraging fellow Slavic-speaking peoples in their quest to throw off Austria-Hungary's rule. The peace treaties following the war led to the birth of a number of states (Poland, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Turkey, and others) ruled by a dominant nationalist ethnic group. This shows that nationalism was in fact the major causative issue of the war.

**THE BALANCE OF POWER AND IMPERIALISM**
This causative factor is summarized in a world history textbook by Jerry Bentley and Herbert Zeigler:

“Aggressive nationalism was also manifest in economic competition and colonial conflicts, fueling dangerous rivalries among the major European powers. The industrialized nations of Europe competed for foreign markets and engaged in tariff wars, but the most unsettling economic rivalry involved Great Britain and Germany. By the twentieth century Germany's rapid industrialization threatened British economic predominance. . . British reluctance to accept the
relative decline of British industry vis-à-vis German industry strained relations between the two economic powers.

Economic rivalries fomented colonial competition. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, European nations searched aggressively for new colonies or dependencies to bolster economic performance. In their haste to conquer and colonize, the imperial powers stumbled over each other, repeatedly clashing in one corner of the globe or another. . . .

Virtually all the major powers engaged in the scramble for empire, but the competition between Britain and Germany and that between France and Germany were the most intense and dangerous. Germany, a unified nation only since 1871, embarked on the colonial race belatedly but aggressively, insisting that it too must have its “place in the sun.” German imperial efforts were frustrated, however, by the simple fact that British and French imperialists had already carved up most of the world. German-French antagonisms and German-British rivalries went far toward shaping the international alliances that contributed to the spread of war after 1914. . . .

Source:

INTERESTS OF INDIVIDUAL NATIONS
Whatever else may have triggered World War I, it must be remembered that nations do not send their sons to die on the battlefield simply because they have signed onto alliances. Nations uphold or ignore alliances based on their own self-interests. To be sure, each of the combatants believed they had interests that had to be protected and pursued and therefore something to be gained by going to war:

• Russia - It saw itself as the Protector of the Slavs and claimed that Austria-Hungary treated Serbs and other Slavic-speaking groups unfairly. Russia also sought ready access to the Mediterranean Sea, but this involved sailing through Ottoman territory.
• The Ottoman Empire - It had been losing territory since the eighteenth century and sought to preserve its integrity and great power status.
• Germany - It shared history and culture with German-speaking Austria, which created a powerful bond between the two states. It also wanted to secure the Rhineland, with its important resources, and to ward off French desires to seek revenge for the loss of Alsace-Lorraine to Germany in 1870.
• Italy - It wanted to strengthen its position as world power and gain more colonies. Italy switched its alliance from the Central Powers to the Allied Powers in 1915 on promises of getting colonies.
• France - It looked upon Germany as an aggressor and wished to get back the territories it had lost to that power following the Franco-Prussian War of 1871.
• Serbia - It wanted to bring all Serbs in the Ottoman and Austrian empires into the Kingdom of Serbia.

ARMS BUILDUP
The Triple Alliance and Triple Entente were supposed to be peace-keeping alliances, designed as deterrents to prevent any power from ganging up on any of the others. A prospective aggressor would know that if it declared war against any member of the opposing alliance, all members of that alliance would come to the attacked member’s defense. While the system of alliances aimed to keep the peace, however, the opposing members were plotting against each other. This was accompanied by a buildup of arms sometimes described as a powder keg. If the army and navy stockpiles had not existed, both alliances would have needed at least
a year to mobilize and build defenses. A year might have been enough time to make them stop and select a more reasonable course. Even today, those who demand reduction of armaments in the world use the same argument. Jerry Bentley and Herbert Zeigler emphasize the naval arms race:

“Germans and Britons convinced themselves that naval power was imperative to secure trade routes and protect merchant shipping. Moreover, military leaders and politicians saw powerful navies as a means of controlling the seas in times of war, a control they viewed as decisive in determining the outcome of any war. Thus when Germany’s political and military leaders announced their program to build a fleet with many large battleships, they seemed to undermine British naval supremacy.

The British government moved to meet the German threat through the construction of super battleships known as dreadnoughts. Rather than discouraging the Germans from their naval buildup, the British determination to retain naval superiority stimulated the Germans to build their own flotilla of dreadnoughts. This expensive naval race contributed further to international tensions and hostilities between nations.”

Source:

Price, Mary. “The Causes and Consequences of World War I: 1900-1920.” World History For Us All. PDF.