Causes of World War I

Though causes of war are complex, historians agree that one particular event set the machine of World War I into motion: the assassination of Austrian Archduke Ferdinand.

Prior to World War I, all the countries of Europe were competing to see who had the most power. One way to increase a country's power is to team up with another country, in a relationship called an "alliance." An ally is someone who is on your side, and who will take action to defend you, if necessary. Many alliances were formed beginning in 1879, with Italy even teaming up with two different sides! 1907, France, Britain, and Russia joined together to form what was known as the "Triple Entente." These three countries together were extremely powerful, and Germany felt threatened.

At the same time, many of these countries were seeking to expand their influence and power by taking over other countries. This is called imperialism. France and Britain already had large empires. Germany and Russia wanted large empires as well, so imperialistic motives caused both competition and conflict between all these countries. They did not trust each other. Europe was like a powder keg, waiting for a spark to make it explode.

Then, on June 28, 1914, the heir to the Austrian-Hungarian throne, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, was assassinated in Sarajevo. The Austrian government thought Serbia was responsible. They already hoped to get Serbia back under their control. They demanded Serbia take certain actions and gave them 48 hours to do so. Serbia did not comply, and Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia a month later. Because of their alliances, the other countries of Europe also got involved, and World War I began.