

Countdown to the First World War

A visual overview of the years, months, then days prior to the outbreak of the First World War

Background

1871 German empire proclaimed as a unified state. Its emergence in the middle of Europe is destabilising; France loses two of its provinces to Germany. Russia mistrusts its expansion.

1871–90 German chancellor Otto von Bismarck initially pursues a policy of reassuring Russia and isolating France. After the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–78, he turns to a policy of protecting the Ottoman empire at the expense of Russia and its ally Bulgaria. This leads to the Dual Alliance with Austria-Hungary (1879) and Triple Alliance (May 1882) which includes Italy. The 1887 Reinsurance Treaty with Russia reduces Russo-German hostility.

1890 The new kaiser, Wilhelm II, dismisses Bismarck and pursues a more aggressive policy, including building ships for the navy. Wilhelm refuses to renew the Reinsurance Treaty.

1890–1914 Germany strengthens colonial ties with two declining empires: Austria-Hungary and Turkey (the Ottoman empire). It also seeks to build a Berlin–Baghdad railway as a colonial axis to

Middle Eastern oil. Its colonial policies alienate Britain, France and Russia. These three powers come closer together in a series of agreements leading to the Triple Entente (31 August 1907) which stands in opposition to the Triple Alliance.

8 October 1912–30 May 1913 First Balkan War. The Balkan League (Greece, Serbia, Bulgaria and Montenegro) attack the Ottoman empire to liberate their fellow subjects and drive the Turks out of Europe.

16 June–10 August 1913 Second Balkan War. Bulgaria attacks its former allies over their division of Macedonia. Bulgaria is defeated and loses territories won in First Balkan War. Austria-Hungary fears new strength of Serbia and its allies.

It is in this inflamed situation that Grand Duke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the throne of Austria, makes an official visit to Sarajevo, capital of the Austrian province of Bosnia (which is next to Serbia), in June 1914.

Countdown to war, July–August 1914



Chris Read is professor of modern European history at the University of Warwick. Professor Read specialises in twentieth-century Russian history. His most recent books are *Lenin, A Revolutionary Life* and *War and Revolution in Russia from 1914–22*.