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 (1878) 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.

1890–1914 Germany strengthens colonial ties with two declining empires: Austria-Hungary and Turkey (the Ottoman empire). It leads to the Dual Alliance with Austria-Hungary (1879) and Triple Alliance in 1882.

1890–1914 Germany assures Austria-Hungary of its support.

August 4
The German commander-in-chief Moltke orders the implementation of the Schlieffen Plan in accordance with which Germany invades Belgium. Britain's protests are rejected by Germany. Britain declares war on Germany. Britain declares war on Austria-Hungary. The USA declares its neutrality

August 6
Austria-Hungary declares war on Russia. Serbia declares war on Germany.

August 7
The British Expeditionary Force arrives in France. Lord Kitchener launches the 'Your Country Needs You' campaign and calls for 100,000 volunteers.

August 1
Germany declares war on Russia and signs secret treaty of alliance with the Ottoman empire (Turkey). Italy and Belgium declare neutrality.

August 3
Germany declares war on France. Belgium refuses to allow German troops to cross its territory. Britain orders mobilisation.

August 5
In support of Serbia, its neighbour, Montenegro declares war on Austria-Hungary. The Ottoman empire closes the Straits (Dardanelles).

July 28
Austria-Hungary declares war on Serbia. Tsar Nicholas II orders Russian mobilisation in defence of its ally Serbia.

July 23
Austria-Hungary issues an ultimatum to Serbia. Serbia's conciliatory response is deemed insufficient by Austria-Hungary.

July 20
Grand Duke Franz Ferdinand and his wife Grand Duchess Sophie assassinated at Sarajevo by Gavrilo Princip, a Bosnian Serb who wants a united Yugoslavia liberated from Austria-Hungary.

June 28
Grand Duke Franz Ferdinand and his wife Grand Duchess Sophie assassinated at Sarajevo by Gavrilo Princip, a Bosnian Serb who wants a united Yugoslavia liberated from Austria-Hungary.

June to 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.

1866 The Prussians defeat Austria at the Battle of Königgrätz.

1859 France and Britain fight in the War of the Crimean against Turkey.

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