Immediate Cause of the War (June 1914)

The First World War finally broke out in the second half of 1914 because of an 'accident' in Bosnia.

- Sarajevo Assassination
- Outbreak of War - July/August 1914

1. The Assassination of Francis Ferdinand at Sarajevo (June 1914)

The final event which led to the outbreak of the First World War took place on June 28, 1914. On that day, the Archduke Francis Ferdinand, heir to the Austrian throne, and his wife were shot dead by a young Serbian nationalist of the Black Hand at Sarajevo, the Bosnian capital.

Why assassinate the Archduke?

The Serbian Black Hand had to assassinate Archduke Ferdinand because he wanted to convert the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy (the Dual Monarchy) into a Triple Monarchy by the inclusion of Serbia. Although the Serbs might gain a certain degree of autonomy within the Triple Monarchy, their long cherished wish of creating a united Serbian state would be dashed to the ground. Francis Joseph, the reigning monarch was eighty-four years old and expected to die soon. Ferdinand’s ideas might have a chance for realization very soon. The Black Hand thought that they should kill Ferdinand before it was too late. Some members of the Serbian cabinet knew the assassination plot in advance but did not stop it.
Austrian intention to destroy Serbia

Austria considered the murder of the heir to the throne an open Serbian attack on the existence of the Dual Monarchy because if Francis Joseph died Austria would be left without an heir. Although she could not find any evidence that the Serbian government was connected with the assassination, Austria consciously exploited the occasion to destroy Serbia as a state to put an end to the Serbian threat to the existence of the Dual Monarchy for ever. A war with Serbia might lead to a war with Russia. Thus Austria wanted to be assured of German support.

German support

The German Kaiser decided to support Austria because he regarded Austria as the only ally of Germany and because he believed that the Russian Czar would not come to help Serbia in a war involving the death of a future monarch. On July 6, Germany assured Austria that should there be an Austro-Serbian war, Germany would stand by her (Austrian) side and give her unlimited support as an ally. This was called the "Blank Cheque".

Ultimatum to Serbia

Having received the wholehearted support from Germany, Austria sent an ultimatum to Serbia on July 23, 1914. The ultimatum was to be answered within 48 hours. It included the following demands:

(i) Serbia was to suppress all anti-Austrian (and Pan-Slav) publications, societies and propaganda.

(ii) Serbia was to dismiss all anti-Austrian officials objected by Austria.

(iii) Austrian police and officials were to enter Serbia and to take part in the Serbian police force in order to carry out the suppression of anti-Austrian activities and investigations concerning the Sarajevo murders.

Serbian reply

These demands infringed Serbian sovereignty. Austria expected that Serbia would reject, thus giving her the excuse to declare war. Serbia accepted the first two demands but rejected the third. Serbia suggested to submit it for arbitration by the Hague Tribunal. William II was satisfied.
with the Serbian reply and did not feel the need to punish Serbia with a war. He declared, "a brilliant diplomatic triumph, no excuse for war."

2. **Outbreak of War - July 1914**

**War declared**

Austria was still determined to destroy Serbia. After declaring the Serbian reply unsatisfactory, the Austrian government declared war on July 28. The bombardment of Belgrade began on July 29.

**Russian mobilization**

The Serbian ally, Russia, learnt of the ultimatum on July 24. On July 26 the Czar reassured the Serbian crown prince that "Russia will in no case be indifferent to the fate of Serbia." Russia certainly could not bear humiliations from Germany any more; if she failed to defend Serbia again and again, Russia could no longer set her foot on the Balkans as the leader of the Slav nations. The Russian Czar was probably encouraged by the French to take a firm stand against Germany, for France had learnt of the Schlieffen War Plan. France urged Russia to mobilize for fear of an immediate German attack. After the bombardment of Belgrade on July 30, the Czar was persuaded by his ministers and Chief of staff to order full mobilization.

**German declaration of war**

Germany feared that she would face attacks from both Russia and France. Germany demanded Russia to stop her mobilization at once. Russia refused. Germany at once declared war on Russia on August 1.

According to the Schlieffen Plan, Germany had to attack France at once. Germany sent an ultimatum to France demanding her to be neutral. After receiving a French reply that France would side with Russia, Germany lost no time and declared war on France on August 3.

**Schlieffen War Plan**

After the formation of the Dual Alliance between Russia and France in 1893, Germany feared attack on two fronts--France in the west and Russia in the east. The result was the Schlieffen Plan (this was the war plan for Germany during the First World War). The Chief of the German General Staff, Count Schlieffen drew up his military plan on the theory that Russia would need at least six weeks to mobilize before she could be ready to attack. In the meantime, Germany could concentrate her military forces against France, which might be subjugated within six weeks by an overwhelming attack through neutral Belgium. Germany could then turn to attack Russia.

**Britain joined the war**

On August 4, according to the Schlieffen Plan, the German troops crossed the Belgian frontier. On the same day the British government declared war on Germany. There were two reasons which prompted Britain to take action at once. Firstly, German invasion of Belgium had aroused British opinion against Germany because the country had been guaranteed as a neutral state by all great powers in 1839 in the Treaty of London. Now the German invasion had treated the treaty as a scrap of paper and so committed a moral crime. Secondly, no British government would tolerate the domination of Belgium by any powerful continental nation because it directly endangered the security of Britain. (Belgium was separated from Britain by a narrow channel only.)

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