It has become a cliché to speak of the causes of the First World War, the Great War, as a "powder keg" (background causes) ignited by a "spark" (immediate cause). While clichés can be trite and boring, they also encapsulate an essential truth. Whatever metaphor you choose, the causes of the First World War can be broken down into a number of trends that developed through the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, leading up to the fateful events of July 1914, often called the July Crisis. These causes did not work in isolation, however. They were interconnected. Militarism was dependent on industrial capacity. Colonial possessions required larger militaries. It is in this interconnectedness that we can begin to seek the causes of the war itself, as well as the scope of the war as it unfolded.

It is important to think about what we mean when we say "cause". What we refer to as background causes are, in the strict sense, not causes—they they did not make the First World War inevitable. Instead, in history, we must talk in terms of probabilities. What follows is a set of developments that made war more likely. These developments increased the suspicion, fear and tension between the European powers and therefore made war more likely. Further, they made a big war more likely. The trend towards larger militaries, industrial capacity and empires made the chances that a short, limited, regional war involving two, maybe three, countries would stay contained slim at best.

**Imperialism**

Until 1850, the European exploration and subsequent exploitation of Africa had largely been limited to the coastal areas. By the 1870s, however, entrepreneurial explorers such as Henry Stanley had begun to awaken to the economic potential of the African interior, touching off a race by European states to claim their own colonies in Africa. The potential of this "scramble" to bring far-flung powers into conflict should be obvious. It certainly was to Bismarck. Despite his disdain for overseas colonies, Bismarck hosted a conference in Berlin in 1885 to hammer out the rules for claiming and exploiting Africa in hopes that these rules would stave off disagreements over ownership. Just as he had no interest in Germany acquiring her own colonies, he did not want disputes between other powers in some distant African land to jeopardize his new Germany by dragging her into a European war.

But in order to feed their massive industrial and military machines, the powers needed access to resources, which in turn created a neo-mercantilist mindset complemented by the drive for colonies in the second half of the 19th century. This thirst had been momentarily slaked by the "scramble for Africa", but by 1900 that well had gone dry. The European powers had claimed all of Africa, with a few small exceptions. Sources of raw materials, not to mention markets, had either to be wrung from existing holdings or wrestled, forcibly or diplomatically, from another power.

Despite Bismarck’s efforts, and in some ways because of his efforts, the European powers would come dangerously close to war over African questions after Bismarck’s retirement in 1890. Part of the problem lay in Bismarck’s desire to stay out of the colony game, the result of which was what the new Kaiser, Wilhelm II, thought was an insulting under-representation of Germany on the world stage. Young Wilhelm demanded that Germany get her "place in the sun" and developed a brash, provocative and ultimately dangerous Weltpolitik (world policy) to achieve it. The result of this ill-conceived policy became evident in 1905. During a state visit to French-controlled Morocco, Wilhelm boldly proclaimed that the status of Morocco should be re-evaluated at an international conference. Unfortunately for the Kaiser, this conference, held at Algecirias the following year, upheld French claims to the territory. While the Kaiser had wished to assert German authority, and in the process drive a wedge between the Anglo-French entente, he served only to strengthen the entente and make the rest of Europe wary of German motives and methods on the world stage. When Germany sent the gunboat Panther to the Moroccan port of Agadir in 1911, to once again pressure France by calling into question her imperial claims, the UK unequivocally supported her ally. Wilhelm came away from Algecirias and the Agadir Crisis feeling that Germany was becoming dangerously isolated and victimized.

**Nationalism**

It is important to keep in mind that a nation is, at its heart, a group of people. In many ways, therefore, imperialism and nationalism are two sides of the same coin. The imperialism of one nation state will generally aggravate the nationalist feelings of those it dominates.

The role that nationalism played in the growing international tensions at the turn of the century is best demonstrated in the Balkans. This region was populated by a number of ethnic groups broadly referred to as Slavs and centred in the small independent nation-state of Serbia. Political domination in the region had traditionally been split between two rival empires, the Austro-Hungarian and the Ottoman. By the end of the 19th century, the crumbling influence and power of the Ottoman Empire, coupled with Austria-Hungary's desire to retrench and expand her influence in the region, made this a very unstable part of the European political system. The flux in the region reawakened in Russia age-old Balkan aspirations. Growing numbers of radical pan-Slavic nationalists living under the Hapsburgs were convinced that their future lay not in a federated Austria-Hungary, but rather in a Greater Serbia or Yugoslavia. With Serbia's ambition to become the Piedmont...
of a pan-Slavic state added to this frightening situation, the region was becoming dangerously volatile. When Italy tried to wrest Tripoli from the Ottomans by force in 1911, Serbia saw an opportunity to profit from the sultan's divided attention and resources. Forming the Balkan League with Bulgaria, Montenegro and Greece, she went to war with Turkey. The profit was Albania and Macedonia, with the lion's share going to Bulgaria, a grievance Serbia quickly addressed by defeating Bulgaria in the second Balkan War in 1913. This time Serbian designs on Albania, and the consequent access to the sea, was thwarted by international intervention, spearheaded by Austria-Hungary. Russia, though a supporter of Serbian claims, backed down when faced with Austrian resolve, just as she had done when the Austrians annexed Bosnia, a Slavic territory, in 1908. The result was the creation of the Independent Kingdom of Albania. The sum total of this confusing ten months of war and negotiation was an Austro-Hungarian Empire determined to stop pan-Slavic nationalist claims, an emboldened Serbia determined to further pan-Slavic nationalist schemes and a twice-humiliated Russian Empire determined to reassert her authority.

**Militarism**

Broadly speaking, we can talk about militarism as an overall societal emphasis on the military. The trend towards massive armies and navies at the end of the 19th century can be highlighted in two ways. On the one hand there are the precise, technical aspects that appeal to many military historians—warship tonnage, troop concentration, military expenditure. On the other hand, we should consider those aspects that appeal to the social historian—the relation of the military to the wider society. Both will be looked at.

It is certainly true that at the turn of the last century, the militaries of the major European powers were the largest in history. Paradoxically, most statesmen, if not generals, believed that this could help avoid a war. This early idea of deterrence held that the larger a country's military, the less likely other countries would be to attack. This might have been true if the size of militaries had remained static. The big problem was that they were growing. If a country was worried that a rival state's army was growing faster than its own, the temptation was to attack the rival pre-emptively before the differential was too great. In short, use your army before you lose it.

Regardless, the fact remains that the military forces that the European powers had at their disposal in 1914 were immense. There were approximately 200 army divisions in Europe in 1914 including reserves (part-time soldiers called up in the event of war). These massive armies were fed by varying degrees of conscription in all European powers with the exception of Great Britain. Men of military age were required to serve from two to six years. In fact, the terms of service were increasing. France passed the Three Year Law in 1913, increasing mandatory military service from two to three years. By all accounts, the Russian army was the largest in the world. The tsar's standing army numbered about 1.3 million and some claimed it could mobilize a further five million reservists. While these figures alone were enough to give pause to any would-be attackers, more alarming was the fact they were growing.

As impressive as the numbers may seem on paper, the reality reflected a dangerous contradiction. In the case of Russia, the likelihood that all of these conscripts would report for duty as required was wishful thinking and if they had it would have created an even bigger problem. The combination of poor infrastructure, massive distance between military depots and poor military organization meant that the most the Russian army could reliably call into service was about one-fifth of the able-bodied men of military age. This deceptive picture was a double-edged sword. To her rivals, inclined as they were to focus on the strength of other states, Russia was an imposing behemoth. To Russian military planners, aware of the deficiencies in their military apparatus, the theoretical or even actual size of the army meant that mobilization must be undertaken before any potential enemy could mobilize. This was to have ominous ramifications in July 1914. Militarism was evident not only in the size of armies and navies, but also in the technology used by these forces. By 1914, modern industrial methods meant that the great armament foundries of Krupp and Skoda were producing artillery that could hurl a one-ton explosive projectile up to 10 miles (16 km). Machine guns could theoretically fire 400 to 600 rounds per minute. In practice, each machine gun was the equivalent of 80 rifles.

The Anglo-German naval race was perhaps one of the starkest illustrations of militarism. When the British Royal Navy launched the revolutionary HMS Dreadnought in December 1906, it instantly made every battleship then afloat, including British ships, obsolete. If a country was to have a modern navy after 1906, it had to spend money on Dreadnoughts. When this was coupled with Germany's desire for a navy to rival the Royal Navy, as expressed in the Second Naval Law of 1900, it created an arms race that would see the size of these navies increase by a combined 197 per cent between 1900 and 1914. Large or even growing militaries do not cause wars. They do, however engender suspicion and fear in rival states. When this suspicion is coupled with economic rivalry, imperialism and nationalism, it makes war more likely. Further, it makes a large, massively destructive war more likely.

It is important to read these background causes together. The massive size of European militaries was made possible by the prodigious increase in European industrial production, fed by raw materials garnered from global empires. The expansion of empires, partially necessitated by the hunger for resources, angered countries such as Germany and Austria-Hungary who wanted to expand their holdings, while simultaneously increasing the anxiety of those at whose expense this expansion would have to occur—countries such as the UK, France, Russia and Serbia, not to mention countless African and Asian peoples, who are often overlooked in this European drama—a drama that was shortly to become a global tragedy.