Causes of World War I Documents

Historical Context:

At the start of the 1900’s, Europe seemed to enjoy a period of peace and progress. Yet below the surface, several forces were at work that would lead Europe into the “Great War.” One of these forces was nationalism, and it had an explosive effect in parts of Europe. But, nationalism was only one of the many causes of World War I. Historians and eyewitnesses have described the causes of World War I and have tried to assess the responsibility for it. What were the causes of World War I?

Question: Who and/or what caused World War I?

Document 1

This chart provides information on the increasing amounts of money spent on armaments from 1870 through 1914.

| Per Capita Expenditures of the Great Powers on Armaments |
|-----------------|------------|------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|------------|
|                 | 1870       | 1880       | 1890       | 1900        | 1910        | 1914       |
| Great Britain   | $3.54      | $3.46      | $3.84      | $12.60*     | $7.29       | $8.23      |
| France          | 2.92       | 4.02       | 4.66       | 5.21        | 6.47        | 7.07       |
| Russia          | 1.28       | 1.50       | 1.26       | 1.44        | 2.32        | 3.44       |
| Germany         | 1.28       | 2.16       | 2.80       | 4.06        | 4.06        | 8.19       |
| Austria-Hungary | 1.08       | 1.70       | 1.50       | 1.46        | 1.68        | 3.10       |
| Italy           | 1.38       | 1.74       | 2.52       | 2.34        | 3.36        | 3.16       |

*Boer War Costs

1. Which three countries increased the amount of money spent on weapons?

2. How did this increase the chance of war?
Document 2

On the eve of World War I the alliance systems were:

Members of the Triple Alliance: Germany, Austria-Hungary, Italy

Members of the Triple Entente: Great Britain, France, Russia

3. How did alliance systems contribute to the outbreak of World War I?

Document 3

This is an edited excerpt from the Austro-Hungarian Red Book No. 7. It is the ultimatum that Austria-Hungary sent to Serbia on July 23, 1914 after the Assassination of Archduke Ferdinand.

. . . the Royal Serbian Government has done nothing to repress these terrorist movements. It has permitted the criminals of various societies and associations directed against the Monarchy, and has tolerated unrestrained language from the news, has glorified the terrorists, and the government has participated in the attempts to harm our society. . . .

. . . [The] Royal Government of Austro-Hungary see themselves compelled to demand from the Royal Serbian Government a formal assurance that they condemn this dangerous propaganda against the Monarchy and are not in favor of the terrorist acts. . . .

. . . Also, Serbia must agree to work with the Austro-Hungarian Government to try to stop these terrorist and anti-government movement . . .

4. What were the accusations made by Austria-Hungary to Serbia?

5. What two demands did Austria-Hungary make on Serbia?
Document 4

This excerpt is from Article 231 of the Versailles Treaty, which Germany signed, thereby ending World War I.

. . . The Allied and Associate Governments affirm and Germany accepts the responsibility of Germany and her allies for causing all the loss and damage. . . .

6. According to the Versailles Treaty, who was responsible for World War I?

Document 5

In this excerpt from May 7, 1919, Count Brockdorff-Rantzau leader of the German delegation to the Versailles Peace Conference, protested.

It is demanded of us that we shall confess ourselves to be alone guilty of the war. Such a confession from my lips would be a lie. We are far from declining all responsibility for the fact that this great World War took place or that it was fought in the way that it was. . . . But we energetically deny that Germany and its people, who were convinced that they fought a war of defense, were alone guilty. No one would want to assert that the disaster began only at that disastrous moment when the successor of Austria-Hungary fell a victim to murderous hands. In the last fifty years, the imperialism of all European states has chronically poisoned international relations. Policies of retaliation, policies of expansion, and disregard for the right of peoples to determine their own destiny, have contributed to the European malady which came to a crises in the World War. The mobilization of Russia deprived statesmen of the opportunity of curing the disease, and placed the issue in the hands of the military powers. . . .

7. What position did the German delegation leader present?

8. What did he say caused the war?
Document 6

In his book, Origins of the World War, Sidney Bradshaw Fay stated his position on the causes of World War I.

Nevertheless, a European war broke out. Why? Because in each country [of Europe] political and military leaders did certain things which lead to the mobilization [of their armies for war] and [finally] to the declarations of war; of [these leaders] failed to do certain things which might have prevented [the war]. In this sense, all the European countries in greater or lesser degree were responsible [for the outbreak of World War I].

9. According to this author, who was responsible for the outbreak of World War I?

10. What did he cite as evidence to support this claim?

Document 7

This is an excerpt from The Century of Total War by Raymond Aron (Doubleday & Co. 1954).

. . . The rise of Germany, who supremacy France dreaded and whose nave menaced [or threatened] England, had created among [England and France] an alliance which claimed it was defensive in nature but was denounced by German propaganda as an attempt at [the] encirclement [of Germany]. The two armed camps alarmed each other, and each grew heavy with multiplied incidents, which spread East [with the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand], where Russia and Austria were advancing contradictory claims. . . .

11. What role did the assassination and the ultimatum play in the outbreak of war?

12. What responsibility did the alliance systems play in the outbreak of war?
13. Which MAIN cause(s) of WWI are illustrated in the picture above? How do you know?

14. Why is Serbia the first in the chain? Why is it the smallest?

Response — Using specific evidence from the documents, answer our overall question:
15. *Who and/or what caused World War I?*