

The Major Alliances of World War I

The pacts resulted from the countries' hope for a balance of power

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By 1914, Europe's six major powers were split into two alliances that would form the warring sides in [World War I](#). Britain, France, and Russia formed the Triple Entente, while Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy joined in the Triple Alliance. These alliances weren't the sole cause of World War I, as some historians have contended, but they did play an important role in hastening Europe's rush to conflict.

The Central Powers

Following a series of military victories from 1862 to 1871, Prussian Chancellor [Otto von Bismarck](#) formed a German state out of several small principalities. After unification, Bismarck feared that neighboring nations, particularly France and Austria-Hungary, might act to destroy Germany. Bismarck wanted a careful series of alliances and foreign policy decisions that would stabilize the balance of power in Europe. Without them, he believed, another continental war was inevitable.

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The Dual Alliance

Bismarck knew an alliance with France wasn't possible because of lingering French anger over Alsace-Lorraine, a province Germany had seized in 1871 after defeating France in the Franco-Prussian War. Britain, meanwhile, was pursuing a policy of disengagement and reluctant to form any European alliances.

Bismarck turned to Austria-Hungary and Russia. In 1873, the Three Emperors League was created, pledging mutual wartime support among Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Russia. Russia withdrew in 1878, and Germany and Austria-Hungary formed the Dual Alliance in 1879. The Dual Alliance promised that the parties would aid each other if Russia attacked them or if Russia assisted another power at war with either nation.

The Triple Alliance

In 1881, Germany and Austria-Hungary strengthened their bond by forming the Triple Alliance with Italy. All three nations pledged support should any of them be attacked by France. If any member found itself at war with two or more nations at once, the alliance would come to their aid. Italy, the weakest of the three, insisted on a final clause, voiding the deal if the Triple Alliance members were the aggressor. Shortly after, Italy signed a deal with France, pledging support if Germany attacked them.

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Russian 'Reinsurance'

Bismarck was keen to avoid fighting a war on two fronts, which meant making some form of agreement with either France or Russia. Given the sour relations with France, Bismarck signed what he called a "reinsurance treaty" with Russia, stating that both nations would remain neutral if one was involved in a war with a third party. If that war was with France, Russia had no obligation to aid Germany. However, this treaty lasted only until 1890, when it was allowed to lapse by the government that replaced Bismarck. The Russians had wanted to keep it. This is usually seen as a major error by Bismarck's successors.

After Bismarck

Once Bismarck was voted out of power, his carefully crafted foreign policy began to crumble. Eager to expand his nation's empire, Germany's Kaiser Wilhelm II pursued an aggressive policy of militarization. Alarmed by Germany's naval buildup, Britain, Russia, and France strengthened their own ties. Meanwhile, Germany's new elected leaders proved incompetent at maintaining Bismarck's alliances, and the nation soon found itself surrounded by hostile powers.

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Russia entered into an agreement with France in 1892, spelled out in the Franco-Russian Military Convention. The terms were loose but tied both nations to supporting each other should they be involved in a war. It was designed to counter the Triple Alliance. Much of the diplomacy Bismarck had considered critical to Germany's survival had been undone in a few years, and the nation once again faced threats on two fronts.

The Triple Entente

Concerned about the threat rival powers posed to the colonies, Great Britain began searching for alliances of its own. Although the UK had not supported France in the Franco-Prussian War, the two nations pledged military support for one another in the Entente Cordiale of 1904. Three years later, Britain signed a similar agreement with Russia. In 1912, the Anglo-French Naval Convention tied Britain and France even closer militarily.

When Austria's [Archduke Franz Ferdinand](#) and his wife [were assassinated in 1914](#), [the great powers of Europe reacted](#) in a way that led to full-scale war within weeks. The Triple Entente fought the Triple

Alliance, although Italy soon switched sides. The war that all parties thought would be finished by Christmas 1914 instead dragged on for four long years, eventually bringing the United States into the conflict. By the time the [Treaty of Versailles](#) was signed in 1919, officially ending the Great War, more than 11 million soldiers and 7 million civilians were dead.

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