Causes of World War I

Many people didn't want a war to begin. Mothers and fathers all over Europe hoped for good lives for their sons who were just becoming adults. Young men hoped to begin their adult lives by going to work, getting married, and raising families. Instead, in 1914, many of them went to war. Some of the leaders in Europe didn't want the war to begin either. They tried to convince others not to go to war. Instead, one country after another declared war.

How did it happen? What caused World War I? There were several causes of World War I. The most immediate cause was the assassination of Archduke Francis Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary. Austria-Hungary decided that Serbia was to blame for the assassination and declared war on Serbia.

Before the assassination, there were other things going on in Europe that led up to the war. One thing was an increase in the feeling of nationalism in many European countries. Nationalism is something like patriotism, so you may be surprised to hear that it was one cause of the war, but nationalism doesn't just mean supporting your own country. Nationalism means putting the interests of your own country above everything else and ignoring the rights of people in other countries.

Another cause of the war was military alliances. When two or more countries make an alliance, they agree to support each other if a war begins. Germany formed an alliance with Austria-Hungary, and Great Britain formed alliances with France and Russia. Alliances made countries on both sides feel powerful. With their allies, they felt safe from attack. The alliances were a cause of the war because, once

countries felt safe from attack, they also felt free to take actions that might anger other countries. Tensions built up among the countries of Europe. As tensions built up, countries in Europe began to make more and more weapons. Each side wanted to be in a position of power, just in case.

With all of this going on, can you see why parts of Europe were referred to as a "powder keg"? The situation in Europe had made it a place that could explode at any moment, just like a barrel full of gunpowder.

The assassination of the Archduke was the spark that set off the powder keg. Feelings of nationalism made countries decide to fight. Alliances brought in more countries. With stockpiles of weapons, a war could begin right away. World War I was the largest and most horrible war that had ever happened up to that time.

Did it all have to happen? Suppose the Archduke had never been shot. Do you think the countries of Europe might have found other ways to solve their problems? Do you think they might have made some different choices before it was too late?