

Background for Subject of Lesson:

The 25 German states were united into the German Empire in 1871 after the Franco-Prussian War. The 'Iron Chancellor' Otto von Bismarck focused on maintaining cordial relations with the other European powers. But when Kaiser Wilhelm II came to the throne in 1888, Bismarck was replaced and policy shifted towards aggressive colonial expansion. This new enthusiasm for colonialism triggered a series of international crises in the early 20th Century, and the rapid expansion of the navy threatened France and Britain. British power was dependent on her navy, and German naval expansion challenged Britain's policy of always having a navy as large as her two nearest rivals combined.

The Hapsburg Empire, which can be traced back to the 10th Century in Switzerland, had its roots in all the major courts of Europe, including that of England. However, over the centuries, its power declined. In 1867, the Hapsburg lands were reorganized into the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. The emperors of Austria-Hungary were bent on acquiring former Ottoman lands, such as Bosnia, as this empire was weakening and breaking up.

The decline of the Ottoman Empire resulted in Serbia's independence in 1885. The rise of nationalism in the Balkans also threatened the stability of Austria-Hungary, which contained large ethnic minority groups. While also eyeing territories of the Ottoman Empire, Russia backed the Balkan Slavs claims for independence putting them into conflict with Austria-Hungary. In 1908, Russia was embarrassed when Austria-Hungary annexed Bosnia-Herzegovina. For the Bosnian Serbs, this quashed any hopes of restored nationhood.

Austria-Hungary could not afford any further increase in nationalism given its huge number of ethnicities. Russia could ill afford to back down a second time, should another crisis arise. Conditions were ripe for a diplomatic incident to start war and it was the political murder of Franz Ferdinand that became the catalyst.