

# *Germany Invades Belgium in 1914*

## **Primary Source Analysis**



## The German Army Marches Through Brussels, 1914

Tensions between the European powers had been building from the mid-1800s through 1914. The primary causes for such tensions were nationalism, militarism, imperialism, and alliances. The main powers in Europe were competing with each other to have the biggest/best/strongest military, an increasingly powerful economy, overseas empire, list of colonies to its name, and more. There were two noteworthy alliances in this competition and build-up: the Central Powers/Triple Alliance and the Allied Powers/Triple Entente. The primary members of the Central Powers were Germany and Austria-Hungary. Britain, France, Russia, and eventually America, will lead the Triple Entente.

The growing nationalistic fervor and international tensions tipped Europe towards war when the Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophie were assassinated in Sarajevo. Gavrilo Princip, a fervent Serbian nationalist and member of the Black Hand, plunged the world into war with a few gunshots. The pre-existing alliance system immediately resulted in Russia backing Serbia and Germany backing Austria-Hungary. When talks between Serbia and Austria-Hungary failed, Austria-Hungary declared war against Serbia in July, 1914.

In accordance with the alliance system, Russia then declared war on Austria-Hungary, Germany declared war on Russia, and France mobilized to protect itself. Germany declared war against France in reaction to its mobilization. Germany's military leaders had devised the Schlieffen Plan, which they believed would allow Germany and its allies to win the war. The plan involved invading and defeating France quickly then rerouting those troops to the Eastern Front to fight Russia. For a variety of reasons, this plan would fail.

To enact the Schlieffen Plan, Germany made the decision to march through *neutral* Belgium to reach France. When Britain saw Belgium's neutrality be violated, and watched Germany commit violent acts of war marching through Belgium, it supported its alliance and declared war on Germany. Short of America, the world was now at war.

**"This was a machine, endless, tireless, with the delicate organization of a watch and the brute power of a steam roller."**

*The German juggernaut smashed its way into Belgium on August 5, initially targeting Belgium's line of defensive fortresses. The Belgian army was forced to retreat and by August 20 the Germans entered Brussels on its way to France. The Belgians elected not to defend the city and the Germans marched through unhindered. Richard Harding Davis was an American newspaper reporter and witnessed the German army's march through the city. We join his account as he sits at a boulevard café waiting for the German arrival:*

"The change came at ten in the morning. It was as though a wand had waved and from a fete-day on the Continent we had been wafted to London on a rainy Sunday. The boulevards fell suddenly empty. There was not a house that was not closely shuttered. Along the route by which we now knew the Germans were advancing, it was as though the plague stalked. That no one should fire from a window, that to the conquerors no one should offer insult, Burgomaster Max sent out as special constables men he trusted. Their badge of authority was a walking-stick and a piece of paper fluttering from a buttonhole. These, the police, and the servants and caretakers of the houses that lined the boulevards alone were visible.

At eleven o'clock, unobserved but by this official audience, down the Boulevard Waterloo came the advance-guard of the German army. It consisted of three men, a captain and two privates on bicycles. Their rifles were slung across their shoulders, they rode unwarily, with as little concern as the members of a touring-club out for a holiday. Behind them so close upon each other that to cross from one sidewalk to the other was not possible, came the Uhlans [cavalry], infantry, and the guns. For two hours I watched them, and then, bored with the monotony of it, returned to the hotel. After an hour, from beneath my window, I still could hear them; another hour and another went by. They still were passing.

Boredom gave way to wonder. The thing fascinated you, against your will, dragged you back to the sidewalk and held you there open-eyed. No longer was it regiments of men marching, but something uncanny, inhuman, a force of nature like a landslide, a tidal wave, or lava sweeping down a mountain. It was not of this earth, but mysterious, ghostlike. It carried all the mystery and menace of a fog rolling toward you across the sea. The German army moved into Brussels as smoothly and as compactly as an Empire State express. There were no halts, no open places, no stragglers. For the gray automobiles and the gray motorcycles bearing messengers one side of the street always was kept clear; and so compact was the column, so rigid the vigilance of the file-closers, that at the rate of forty miles an hour a car could race the length of the column and need not stop - for never did a single horse or man once swerve from its course.

All through the night, like a tumult of a river when it races between the cliffs of a canyon, in my sleep I could hear the steady roar of the passing army. And when early in the morning I went to the window the chain of steel was still unbroken. It was like the torrent that swept down the Connemaugh Valley and destroyed Johnstown. This was a machine, endless, tireless, with the delicate organization of a watch and the brute power of a steam roller. And for three days and three nights through Brussels it roared and rumbled, a cataract of molten lead. The infantry marched singing, with their iron-shod boots beating out the time.

They sang *Fatherland, My Fatherland*. Between each line of song they took three steps. At times 2000 men were singing together in absolute rhythm and beat. It was like blows from giant pile-drivers. When the melody gave way the silence was broken only by the stamp of iron-shod boots, and then again the song rose. When the singing ceased the bands played marches. They were followed by the rumble of the howitzers, the creaking of wheels and of chains clanking against the cobblestones, and the sharp, bell-like voices of the bugles.

More Uhlans followed, the hoofs of their magnificent horses ringing like thousands of steel hammers breaking stones in a road; and after them the giant siege-guns rumbling, growling, the mitrailleuses [machine guns] with drag-chains ringing, the field-pieces with creaking axles, complaining brakes, the grinding of the steel-rimmed wheels against the stones echoing and re-echoing from the house front. When at night for an instant the machine halted, the silence awoke you, as at sea you wake when the screw stops. For three days and three nights the column of gray, with hundreds of thousands of bayonets and hundreds of thousands of lances, with gray transport wagons, gray ammunition carts, gray ambulances, gray cannon, like a river of steel, cut Brussels in two."

**References:**  
Richard Harding Davis' account appears in: Downey, Fairfax, Richard Harding Davis: His Day (1933); Keegan, John, The First World War (1999).



Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### Questions

1. Which European countries were part of the Central Powers and which were part of the Triple Entente?
2. Who assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand?
3. How did that assassination lead to a world war?
4. How did the Schlieffen Plan lead to Britain declaring war against Germany?
5. Using what you know about imperialism, explain how the world was at war when the fighting was happening in Europe and between European powers.
6. Why do you think the Belgians decided not to defend Brussels?



**Answers should be along the lines of**

1. CP: Germany/Austria-Hungary...TE: Britain, France, Russia
2. Gavrilo Princip
3. Gavrilo was Serbian, for nationalistic reasons he assassinated an Austrian, that made the alliance system kick in...domino effect
4. Belgium was neutral, Germany marching through Belgium violated its neutrality, Britain declared war on Germany to come to the aid of/protect Belgium
5. answers should touch on that the people who were colonized frequently had to fight with/support with resources their European counterparts
6. answers will vary, but will likely include things like they chose to prevent additional deaths and structural damage
7. Richard Davis, he's American so he's not technically in the war yet so he should be neutral, but historically America is similar to, and allied with, Britain/France/Belgium type countries rather than Germany/Austria-Hungary
8. answers will vary
9. it was like a machine, no one was out of step, no one was behind
10. answers will vary
11. answers will vary, but they should certainly identify the larger figure as representing Germany, and the smaller representing Belgium, and that no thoroughfare means you can't go there/travel on that road/trespass

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