

Overview of wilhelm ii foreign policy



Historiographical Debate: War Guilt Clause of Treaty of Versailles created popular perception that Germany was to blame for WWI. [You should beware such a determinist stance!: you must remember that Wilhelm II presided over 24 years of peace before war broke out in 1914.]

In the 1920s and early 1930s, the general appeasement and conciliatory policies of the western powers modified this perception somewhat. Germany was seen, in this period, as having ‘stumbled into war’.

However, by the late 1930s Hitler’s aggression was making people re-think, again, the nature of German foreign policy, and the extent to which it was inherently expansionist and aggressive.

In 1961 Fritz Fischer published his famous book (Germany’s Aims in the First World War), which once again suggested that Germany bore prime responsibility for the outbreak of WWI, and that this had been systematically planned for since 1911. You must make some decision on this, after studying the evidence, as you will be expected to know about, and comment on, the Fischer debate.

Wilhelm’s foreign policy can be subdivided/periodised into:

End of the Bismarckian system 1890-1897

Emergence of Weltpolitik 1897-1907

Descent into war 1907-1914

End of the Bismarckian system:

Lapse of reinsurance treaty with Russia

Resulted in dual alliance between France and Russia 1894.

This alliance between Russia and France was perhaps unavoidable. Caprivi had to make a strategic decision between Germany's alliance with Austria-Hungary and the Reinsurance Treaty with Russia. He therefore allowed the Reinsurance Treaty to lapse, which pushed France towards Russia anyway, resulting in the Franco Russian alliance of 1894.

Attempts to foster a British alliance failed: first Navy law emerged 1897 – antagonistic competition with British fleet

1897 Italy joined Austro-German alliance

Concluding remarks: in 1897 Germany fairly safe. Alliances existed which excluded her and there was the potential risk of encirclement, but neither France nor Russia really wanted conflict with a formidable military power such as Germany: Russia couldn't afford it (pre-industrial) and France had imperial interests to protect.

However, H Holger pointed out that where foreign policy lies in the hands of an individual there is always a risk that their personality will influence affairs....

“ Bismarck had played chess, Wilhelm II played poker”

2. Emergence of Weltpolitik 1897-1907

Fritz Fischer saw 1897 as a turning point in Germany foreign policy. This was mainly because of the increased role of the 'Kaiser's men' in politics: Tirpitz, Posadowsky, Bulow you have already met, plus Holstein at the Foreign Office and von Miquel, the Prussian Finance Minister.

Term used by Bulow, Wilhelm II and Hollweg

Not an easy term! Basically 2 forms:

Economic imperialism. This was informal and was based on the expansion of trading markets rather than political control.

Political expansion / lebensraum, either overseas or in Europe.

Economic imperialism was favoured by industry, who wanted new markets for goods. Economic expansion had been pursued earlier in Wilhelm's reign, for example, into the near East, which threatened Russian grain trading interests there, and prompted a Russian move towards France.

There were some industrialists who favoured political expansion, because it would give them direct access to raw materials. However, most industrialists preferred mere access to markets which economic imperialism would generate.

Political expansion was favoured by the Kaiser, certainly, then mainly by the mittelstand (lower middle class) and agricultural workers, who saw their decreasing economic status in Germany and wanted opportunity for emigration and new start.

This sentiment was partly reflected in internal migration and was such internal colonization (mainly of eastern territories) was facilitated by the Settlement Commission and Expropriation Law of 1908 (this can be seen as extension of Bismarck's policies!), but greater horizons were desired. In fact, G Geiss has argued that "weltpolitik...came into existence as a red herring of the ruling classes to distract the middle ruling classes from social and political problems at home".

Obviously, the army also favoured political expansion, as this would in turn increase their role, status and influence on government.

Germany had entered the Empire Race late. She had acquired overseas colonies in Africa by 1890 (Togoland, the Cameroons, East Africa). By 1899 she acquired Pacific islands of Samoa, the Carolines and Marianas, and a strip of the French Congo in 1911 as part of the Moroccan Crisis deal. However, none of these colonies were profitable. For example, South-West Africa didn't cover the costs of administration, even once diamonds were found in 1908.

Informal empire was much more lucrative, e. g Latin America and south east Europe. Government, banks and businesses cooperated well, for example, in providing financial backing for the completion of a Baghdad to Berlin railway, which would open up access to the oil reserves of the Ottoman Empire. This cooperation of multiple interest groups is Fischer's hallmark of Weltpolitik in action.

Impact of imperialism:

Required an increase in military strength to pursue. The role of the army in foreign policy has been much debated.

Porter and Armour argue that “ it would not be too much of an exaggeration to say that the army in Wilhelmine Germany was a ‘ state within a state’ “

G Craig also shares this view.

Must remember that there was no ‘ German’ Army, except in war time. There existed four armies of Prussia, Bavaria, Saxony and Wurttemberg, Prussian was the biggest.

However, since 1874 the Army budget only reviewed by Reichstag every 7 years – Septennat. After 1893, increased to once every 5 years. Army therefore financially independent.

Plus, since 1883, the Army had direct access to Emperor. The Kaiser was personally very militaristic and had natural sympathy for the army’s aims. The international situation was increasingly tense: ancient hostility of France exacerbated by imperial competition, the growing threat of Russia, brought about by economic competition. This gave the army an additional reason to push for expansion. In addition, the army chiefs sold the army to Wilhelm as the last stronghold against socialism and revolution.

The status of the army as above the law was proven by the Zabern incident. Although Hollweg received rough treatment from the Reichstag over the incident, no action was taken against the army officers involved. In fact, there was widespread sympathy for the army! M Kitchen goes so far as to argue that the army was one of the most popular institutions in the Second

Reich. This is possibly linked to the fact that the unification of Germany was largely owed to the Army, who had created the state without defeat and was seen to be able to defend it in similar fashion.

Nevertheless, Germany's army not significantly increased until army laws 1912-13

This was because:

- army officers mainly Junker aristocrats – didn't want increased middle-class element in officer class which would have been inevitable result of expansion in armed forces

- the army didn't have the ability to train a larger army effectively.

Descent into war 1907-1914

You could be forgiven for thinking that war must have been inevitable, if strategies to cope with a two front war had been developing since the late 1890s (even though Schleiffen's plan wasn't made public till 1905). However, the situation in 1900 was not entirely unstable. Yes, Russia was growing in strength and in hostility to Germany, as a result of economic competition in the near east. Certainly, Britain and France were becoming concerned about Germany's Imperial ambitions. Yet, in 1900, even though Russia and France were allies since 1894, this threat was balanced by the counterweight of British neutrality. In addition, none of these powers were interested in war if it could be avoided – Russia didn't have the might, and Britain and France had priorities elsewhere. So, why did war break out in 1914 and why has Germany often been held responsible?

It could be argued that the biggest miscalculation in German policy was Tirpitz 'risk theory'. He thought that if Germany built a navy to rival Britain, Britain would be intimidated and would seek an alliance with Germany. Bulow's views compounded this miscalculation. He believed that a conflict between Britain and Russia was inevitable (?!). He preferred to side with the Russians, but only once he was sure they would win. So, for Bulow, building a navy to rival Britain's would help Germany maintain a 'free hand' – where they could preserve good relations with both nations and await the outcome, which would be Britain's defeat, at which point having a powerful navy would enable Germany to supplant Britain as the major world power!

The reality of Britain's reaction was the opposite to what Tirpitz and Bulow anticipated. The Navy Laws of 1898 and 1900 made Britain nervous and hostile. As a result, she sought alliance with France and Russia instead. In 1904 the Entente Cordiale was signed by Britain and France.

In 1905 the German attempt to undermine Anglo-French relations by provoking the first Moroccan crisis backfired. Spain had granted France a virtual protectorate in Morocco. In direct challenge, the Kaiser landed in Morocco in 1905. It seems likely that the Kaiser wanted to test the Entente, to see if Britain, in particular, would support France's claim. She did. The attempt to divide France and Britain had failed spectacularly. The resulting Algeiras conference, called to resolve the crisis, was a diplomatic failure for Germany in 1906; Germany was forced to accept a French protectorate in Morocco. In addition, Bulow's attempt to divide Britain and Russia also failed. Bulow attempted to stir up trouble between Britain (Japan's ally since 1902) and Russia during the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-5. Both parties were

annoyed. By 1907 Russia and Britain had joined a Triple Entente with their mutual ally, France.

Moreover, Britain made it clear that she was not prepared to allow Germany to dominate the seas, and entered a naval race. Even Bulow, in 1908, voiced his reservations with existing policy and suggested that Britain may be able to blockade the German navy in her harbours, should conflict arise. This would render Germany's expensive navy useless. Bulow further suggested to Tirpitz that it may be worth investing rather in improving coastal fortifications and creating a strong submarine fleet. Tirpitz disagreed. It is interesting to speculate on how differently the first world war would have turned out had investment been made along the lines Bulow suggested!

Yet, even at this point, Europe was still about 7 years away from war!

Germany could have neutralized Britain had she removed the threat of a naval race and limited her Imperial ambitions. Yet Bulow persisted in his policy. The naval laws of 1906 and 1908 prompted Britain to build the Dreadnought – a battleship more powerful than anything the Germans held!

Germany then supported the Austrian annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1908, which only served to anger Russia, to de-stabilise the Balkans and, at the least, to irritate Britain and France on Russia's behalf.

The appointment of Hollweg in 1909 was a possibility for rapprochement. He actively sought an Anglo-German alliance. However, the Kaiser, Tirpitz and the army continually thwarted him. In addition, Tirpitz's propaganda techniques had created such popular support for naval expansion that it

became impossible for Hollweg to back down from this policy without losing public support, particularly given the stalemate that existed in the Reichstag.

In 1911 France contravened the Algeciras agreement and Germany was awarded a strip of the French Congo in compensation. But this further damaged Anglo-German relations, as Britain came to the support of France against what she saw as German bullying. The alliances were crystallizing into military camps.

The Balkan wars of 1912-13 were a further de-stabilising influence, as the crumbling Ottoman Empire created a power vacuum in the region, which brought Austrian and Russian interests (and, therefore, those of their allies) into direct conflict.

The Kaiser called a war council in 1912, resulting in an increase in the size of the army in a law of 1913. However, no real war planning was in evidence. In addition, Edward Grey, the British Foreign Secretary, was still pushing peace talks as late as 1914 (although this doesn't necessarily imply similar German desire for rapprochement!).

Was Germany foreign policy the result of domestic policy?

This is sometimes called 'social imperialism' – where expansion is the result of an attempt to distract people from problems at home.

VR Berghahn argues that Germany's foreign policy was dictated by rapid industrialisation

If one considers *sammmlungspolitik* – the alliance of steel and rye (industry and agriculture) from 1897 in their joint bid to crush socialism, one can perhaps see that domestic issues were perhaps pressing enough to warrant distraction!

However, this is a somewhat simplistic argument and you should offer a variety of alternative causes for Germany's foreign policy such as

- the power of the army

- Wilhelm's personality

- industrial interests (in their own right, rather than as a challenge to socialism)

- competitive imperial climate of the time

- recent unification – set militaristic tone for nation and also encouraged expansion as means of further consolidating status of nation in Europe

- anything else you can think of!

So, was Germany set on war in 1914?

4 interpretations:

Germany deliberately unleashed war for continental and even world hegemony Fischer (not born out by the evidence)

Hollweg provoked a diplomatic crisis which he knew might lead to war, because he was more afraid of Germany's isolation than he was of war.

(unlikely, not really much evidence that anyone was concerned about isolation, even after the Moroccan crises)

All nations were equally responsible for the outbreak of war (wishy-washy, fence-sitting argument – avoid)

War wasn't planned or pre-determined, but was an acceptable option as the German government expected war to be both short-lived and winnable (very plausible – the Kaiser was influenced by the army's advice, the army believed they could win – as they had a great track record and a now expanded force, and the chaotic nature of the Wilhelmine government meant that Hollweg's moderating influence would not be heard))

Porter and Armour argue that “ the German government, by 1914, was looking for a chance to break out of encirclement, confident of its strength and determined to seize on the first suitable pretext for demonstrating this”

Hollweg continually maintained that German expansion required agreement with Britain and that, if he could pick on Russia over an issue which didn't involve British interests, he would be successful, and war would be avoided.

The assassination of France Ferdinand provided just such an opportunity. Russia came to the aid of Serbia against an unjustifiable Austrian ultimatum. It is true that Germany was secretly complicit with Austria in drafting the terms of the ultimatum. This could be seen as deliberate provocation of war.

The terms of the Triple Alliance allowed Germany to see Russian mobilization as a threat to Austria, and therefore an occasion to defend her. The Schlieffen Plan, with its necessary killer blow to France to be delivered first,

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required speed. Thus once Russian mobilization began, war in Europe was inevitable. On 1 August Germany declared war on Russia. On 3rd August Germany declared war on France. On 4 August Britain reacted to the violation of Belgian neutrality and declared war on Germany.

So, it seems that war in 1914 was really little more than a ludicrous miscalculation on the part of Germany. Agree or disagree? The choice, as ever, is yours!

Timeline of Foreign Policy, 1890-1914

1890

- Bismarck is dismissed.

- Germany refuses to renew the Re-insurance Treaty with Russia, who therefore starts to look to France for friendship.

1891

- Franco-Russian Entente: Germany anticipates a war on two fronts and draws up the Schlieffen Plan. Looks to Britain for an alliance.

1894

- Franco-Russian Alliance confirms Germany's fears – she now looks more to Britain.

1896

- Kruger Telegram: Germany tries to show Britain how isolated she is to frighten her into an alliance, but merely infuriates Britain.

1898

- First Naval Law hopes to scare Britain into an alliance. Germany demands a high price for her friendship, reasoning that British alliances with France and Russia are unlikely due to their ancient enmity. Therefore Germany rejects Britain's alliance propositions, thinking that they are too favourable to Britain.

1899

- The Fashoda incident aggravates Anglo-French Relations (or so Germany thinks). Encourages Germany to demand a still higher price. Britain feels isolated.

1900

- Second Naval Law attempts to frighten Britain and fails.

1901

- Anglo-German talks once again collapse.

1902

- Anglo-Japanese Treaty: France doesn't want to be drawn into a Russo-Japanese war (and therefore have to fight Britain) due to the Franco-Russian alliance, so she seeks agreement with Britain. Germany begins to feel uneasy.

1903

- Murzsteg Agreement: Austria-Hungary and Russia agree to maintain the status quo in the Balkans for 5 years.

- Serbian pro-Habsburg monarchy overthrown in favour of a pro-Romanov one: signifies beginning of Austro-Hungarian enmity for Serbia. Austro-Russian relations remain tense.

- Edward VII makes a triumphant visit to Paris.

1904

- Entente Cordiale: Alliance of friendship between France and Britain. Germany feels increasingly isolated and sees the chances of an Anglo-German alliance diminishing.

- Dogger Bank incident after Russo-Japanese declared: Germany hopes it will aggravate Anglo-Russian relations, but France keeps them on good terms.

- Defeat of Russia in the Russo-Japanese war. Russia turns back to the Balkans instead of the Far East for expansion and Britain no longer sees Russia as a threat and is therefore more willing to ally with her.

1905

- Germany sees this and arranges the Bjorko Treaty with Russia, but it is incompatible with Franco-Russian alliance and so is rejected.

- Germany tries to split the Entente Cordiale in the Moroccan Crisis, but only succeeds in revealing the weaknesses of the Triple Alliance (as Italy deserts her), strengthening the Entente and bringing Britain and Russia closer as

they are on the same side for once. Germany falls back even more on Austria-Hungary.

1907

- Anglo-Russian Entente confirms Germany's fears of being " encircled" and she relies even more on Austria-Hungary.

- The Third Naval Law does little to worry Britain.

1908

- Daily Telegraph Article by Wilhelm fails to persuade Britain that Germany is friendly and that her naval building is purely defensive.

- Young Turk Revolution makes Austria-Hungary eager to annex Bosnia before the Turks become too strong to resist. Hence...

- The Bosnian Crisis: Germany's virtual isolation forces her to support Austria-Hungary, which has the unpleasant side-effects of

- (a) making Austria-Hungary more aggressive

- (b) Increasing the Entente's enmity towards Germany.

Russia is diplomatically defeated and is determined never to be again.

Austria-Hungary becomes more cocky. Germany's support for Austria-Hungary now becomes certain.

1911

- Agadir Crisis: Shows how Germany was more eager to extend her influence than to improve her foreign relations. Once again her isolation and her unpopularity are brought home to her.

1912

- Balkan Wars make a strong Serbia: Austria-Hungary is determined to crush her before she gets too strong.

1913

- Britain, France, Russia and Germany all make military improvements.

1914

- Assassination of Franz Ferdinand gives Austria-Hungary an excuse to attack Serbia.

Tasks:

A. Research:

If you are working as a group, divide the main events (highlighted in bold) between yourselves. Each person should research their event in more detail using any sources available to them, and then report back to the group with either a handout or a presentation.

B. Analysis:

(i) What was the main turning point in international relations between 1890-1914? Explain your answer.

(i) To what extent can Wilhelm II be blamed for the outbreak of the First World War?

F: AQA Germany Option GEra of Wilhelm IIRel between WII Foreign and Domestic Policy SWK ex. pdf

Discussion

Identify

When was Schlieffen's war plan unveiled? 1905

Name the historian most associated with the theory that Germany's planned aggression was primarily responsible for the outbreak of WWI – Fritz Fischer

In what years did Germany pass Army Laws?

1912-13

In what years did Germany pass Navy Laws?

1898

1900

Describe

How was the Schlieffen plan supposed to work?

-as soon as Russia mobilised, Germany to attack France. This was because Russia would take 6 weeks to fully mobilize and, if G could defeat F in that 6 week period, she could avoid war on 2 fronts. Attack on F would be through Belgium, in violation of Belgian neutrality protected by GB. G didn't think GB would get involved despite treaty, as GB only had small army and didn't

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really want to involve herself in European affairs. If G could defeat F quickly, may be no point in GB mobilizing. Also G didn't really see GB's army as much of a threat, so was risk worth taking. G to march round the rear of Paris and seize capital before F troops could return from Maginot line forts. Once capital secured, country defeated. Holding force could then be left and main G army returned to east to fight Russia.

What was Tirpitz' risk theory?

-if Germany built a navy to rival Britain, Britain would be intimidated and would seek an alliance with Germany

What is H Holger's quote on the difference between the FP of Bismarck and Wilhelm?

“ Bismarck had played chess, Wilhelm II played poker”

How have Porter and Armour described the army in Wilhelm's Germany?

- 'state within a state'

Explain

Why was the army so powerful?

-financially independent since...

-had ear of Kaiser since..

-Kaiser's personal interest in militarism

-public support -since unification and also because Tirpitz' Navy League (1898) created a propaganda campaign to mobilize public support

Why did the size of the army not really increase until 1912-13?

-army elites didn't want increase in middle-class presence

-no facilities for training

Why did Britain's hostility towards Germany grow?

-Tirpitz' risk theory – Navy Laws of 1898, 1900

-imperial competition

-irritation at Germany's meddling during the Russo-Japanese war

-Germany's support for A-H's annexation of Bosnia 1908

Why was Hollweg unable to achieve an Anglo-German alliance?

-thwarted by military interests

-public support for militarization

Why did Russia feel threatened by Germany?

-economic competition for grain markets in near east

-German support for Austrian destabilization of/expansion into the Balkans

Why is Wilhelm's foreign policy in the years preceeding WWI such a 'hot topic' for debate amongst historians?

-because of the later aggression displayed by Hitler. in trying to understand the nazi regime, historians try to decide whether Hitler was an aberration or whether aggressive expansionism of Hitler part of a wider trend in German history.

Why does Fischer see 1897 as a turning point in Germany's Foreign Policy?

-Kaiser's men in key positions

How could the Morocco crisis of 1905 be seen as an attempt to challenge the Entente?

The Kaiser's direct challenge to French interests there was a deliberate attempt to see if GB would support French claim

Analyse

Was Weltpolitik a genuine threat to peace?

How serious a threat was encirclement to Germany in the period 1904-1914?

Was Germany seeking war in 1914?