

War to end all wars

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In 1914 Europe plunged in to the abyss of total war due to the clashing interests of empires' spheres of influence. The futile attempts to restore the Austro-Hungarian empire and nationalist dissent within the Balkans accelerated tensions arising from imperialism between the Great Powers. In such a precarious situation Germany adopted a bellicose attitude and during the 1914 July Crisis she " pushed Britain and France to the wall" (Geiss). Through vague aspirations for world domination Germany threatened Britain's hegemony and heightened the disastrous forced of change, and exploited events to begin the 'War to End all Wars'.

European tension from fluctuating borders and the rise of new imperialist ambitions originated from German unification in 1871 that tilted the pre-existing balance of power. The German population soared from 49 to 66 million between 1890 and 1914 steel output was higher than that of Britain, France and Russia combined while the prominence of science and technology in the school curriculum gave Germany the lead in new 'high-tech' industries. German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck aimed to protect Germany against a war of revanche to recover the lost territories of Alsace and Lorraine through a Franco-Russian alliance.

Hoping to diffuse Austro-Russian animosity in the Balkans while isolating France, Bismarck created the Dreikaiserbund (The Three Emperors' League) between Germany, Austria and Russia under which the nations agreed to neutrality in any attack by a fourth nation. In 1876 Bosnia and Herzegovina revolted against the Ottoman Empire and as revolutions spread to Serbia and Bulgaria it escalated into a full-scale war between Russia and Turkey resulting in Ottoman defeat.

Reinforced by nation of Pan Slavism in which Russia saw itself as the protector of its " Slav brothers" Russia craved to gain naval access to a warm water port in the Black Sea through the Straits. However as part of his desire to maintain cordial Austro-Russian relations Bismarck sought British assistance however Britain feared that the Sultan's downfall would prove to be excessively advantageous for Russia, the concerns of which were confirmed in the 1878 Treaty of San Stefano.

Under this agreement, Bulgaria was created, Serbia and Montenegro extended their frontiers and Bosnia and Herzegovina were granted autonomy under joint Austro-Russian rule. Bismarck then decided to play 'honest broker' in the crisis and proposed an international congress in Berlin where Bosnia Herzegovina was placed under the exclusive administration of Austria Hungary. The Dual Alliance, a secret treaty in 1879 between and Austria and Hungary, confirmed German support of Austrian ambitions and cemented the military alliance against a Russian attack in regards to the Balkans.

However to reinvigorate Russian diplomatic involvement Bismarck negotiated the renewal of the Driekaiserbund in 1887 where they agreed that Austria could annex Bosnia and Herzegovina while Russia was granted freedom to use the Straits. Furthermore, the Reinsurance Treaty of 1887 inherently displayed Bismarck's determination to maintain French isolation and European stability through mutual deterrence.

Germany finally accepted Russia's Balkan influence and coerced Austria to withdraw from the Bulgarian issue. Ignorant of the political significance of

international financial links, Bismarck banned the sale of Russian bonds on the Berlin Stock Exchange and amputated German assistance to the Russian war machine. The decision undermined Russo-German relations and unwittingly encouraged Russia to turn to Paris in its search for funds.

Despite his short term crisis management the growing chorus of nationalist organizations and a strong anti-Russian clique in the German imperial court pressing for an aggressive expansionist foreign policy culminated in his abrupt dismissal by the young Kaiser Wilhelm II in 1890. The unstable and incapable Kaiser Wilhelm initiated Weltpolitik and Drang Nach Osten (Drive to the East) where Germany abandoned Bismarck's delicate alliance system, embarked upon colonial acquisition in Asia and Africa, and instituted a program of rapid naval construction.

By the 1890s by France provided economic assistance to fund Russia's industrial development through major infrastructure projects such as the construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway and in 1894 a Franco-Russian military agreement was signed promising support if attacked by Germany and mobilisation if the Triple Alliance powers mobilised. As for tests of strength, the Boer War (1889-02) convinced the British at the dangers of isolation and the severe limits to British resources for overseas ventures.

The war required a significant proportion of the army and navy to defeat a disorganised body of Dutch farmers fighting for independence in South Africa and revealed the weaknesses of the British army, thus arousing demands for an immediate change in foreign policy from her traditional "splendid isolation" The first move by the British government away from isolation was

the signing of the Anglo-Japanese Treaty (1902), designed to ease their paranoia over trade in the region and to balance Russia's growing power in the Far East.

This agreement gave the Japanese recognition of its interests in Korea, and an assurance of British neutrality in the event of a war between Japan and Russia. Now granted the status of world power Japan faced the Russians in Manchuria with greater confidence and when Britain failed to intervene during the Russo-Japanese War (1904-05) Japan gained an unexpected victory while Russia suffered a humiliating defeat, exacerbating problems in a debilitated economy.

The Anglo-French Entente Cordiale (1904) settled outstanding colonial differences as it aimed at strengthening France's 'free hand' in Morocco and confirming Britain's primacy in Egypt. In addition, Russian defeat in the Russo-Japanese War accelerated Russian anxiousness to win British support for a revision in relation to the international regulations closing the exit from the Black Sea in time of war. In 1907 the Anglo-Russian Convention also reconciled old differences on the frontiers between the two empires, particularly in Persia, Afghanistan and Tibet.

India was Britain's main captive market, held a fruitful field for capital investment and was a direct source of government revenue. The agreement with Russia greatly diminished one of the main threats to India's external security because as Lord Curzon wrote in 1901: " If we lose [India] we shall drop straight away to at third-rate power". Though both the Entente and the Anglo-Russian Convention gave no promise of military co-operation in the

event of a European war, the German government saw British rapprochement as a bitter blow that cemented its growing diplomatic encirclement by 'hostile powers'.

Weltpolitik aimed to create a strong navy that would force Britain to opt for neutrality in any future European war and implied that Germany should seek territorial expansion overseas. Throughout the 19th century the superiority of the British navy was taken for granted and the army neglected therefore but it soon realised the German fleet was the first serious threat to British naval hegemony since the Napoleonic Wars. To avoid the dilemma where the existence of the German fleet would limit her freedom of action, Britain increased naval construction so that the pace of naval armament was constantly accelerating.

Since 1889 its policy had been explicitly governed by the 'two power' standard by which its navy had to be stronger than the combined fleets of the next two naval powers but with the introduction of the technologically advanced Dreadnought battleship class in 1906, obsolescence of equipment quickly precipitated and their dominance amputated. The naval race not only created political and psychological attitudes that contributed to the mood of 1914 it also inaugurated economic and technical processes, which were increasingly hard to reverse.

The costs of armaments and the strain of German public finance was so great that only a war in which the rules of orthodox finance could be suspended would save the German state from bankruptcy. However, the Kaiser's personal commitment and superficial strategic thinking also

contributed to zealotry of German naval building. Fritz Fischer suggested that German policy was a means of diverting attention from domestic discontent since liberals were starting to agitate for a reform of the restricted franchise for the Prussian Landtag.

According to Arno Mayer " the German government hoped for great diplomatic and military victories with which to consolidate the monarchy, hold back reform, and prevent revolution. " To justify the lack of democracy the Kaiser and the Junkers devised strategy of *Sammlungspolitik* (the politics of 'collection') that encouraged support for popular nationalist pressure groups, imperialist adventures and naval rivalry, thus weakening the influence of the Social Democrats in Parliament.

As the Reichstag, which wanted to restrict military spending, was growing in stature, German domestic politics with its bureaucratic infighting proved a handicap for militarists. The army enthusiastically pushed for war and broke free of domestic restrictions on increased armaments' expenditure because only under conditions of war could it gain access to spending resources required for *Weltpolitik*.

The fundamental vulnerability of Britain's imperial position, American rise to world power and the danger of native unrest and uprisings in Egypt, South Africa, Ireland, and India particularly in the North West Frontier meant that the challenges could only be addressed through exponential expenditure increases. The empire was acquired and maintained on cheap labour, and Parliament required that it be kept so, especially when demands for welfare measures called for cuts in military spending.

The Triple Entente (1907) reflected Britain's view of a German threat due to the agreements she sought with France and Russia. Britain's colonial agreements were not directed to encircle Germany but only became so because of Germany's belligerent conduct. Refusing all military commitments, Britain had to give her friends moral support more unstintingly or risk them joining the 'other camp'. In 1905 Chancellor Bulow decided to test the closeness of the Entente Cordiale by offering German support to the Sultan of Morocco against the French who had been "given" the territory by Britain.

The Germans called for an international conference to determine the fate of Morocco, believing that support for Moroccan independence by Britain and Russia would humiliate France and end the Entente. However in the 1906 Algeiras Conference Russia refused to join Germany in a defensive alliance which would undermine its French commitment, Britain clearly stated it would not remain neutral in the event of a German attack upon France and France refused to aggravate the conflict any further while only Austria-Hungary stood firm with the humiliated Germany.

German dependence upon Austria drew her into Austria's individual quarrels in the Balkans and fearful of Austria's demise or defection, Germany incessantly provoked her to seek salvation in violence. Austria prematurely annexed Bosnia and Herzegovina to halt the spread of the "Young Turk" revolution in 1908. It hoped a vigorous foreign policy would quell problems arising from its polyglot empire especially ambitions to make Serbia 'the Piedmont of the Southern Slavs'.

Despite Russia's effort to restore the flagging international prestige of the Tsarist regime, it accepted the legitimacy of the annexations because of the European uproar that followed and its inability to face the prospect of another defeat soon after its debacle against Japan. Standing by in "shining armour", Germany hardened Russia's attitude against future indignities as it initiated a rearmament program. On 28th June 1914, a Serbian nationalist group who could not afford 'relative deprivation' assassinated Archduke France Ferdinand, heir to the Austrian throne.

Berchtold (Austrian Foreign Minister) saw it as a fast chance of "political rehabilitation" and an opportunity to rouse public opinion in support of a war that aimed to weaken self-determination. Austria delivered an ultimatum to Serbia that demanded the elimination of terrorist activities and joint Hapsburg-Serb action to suppress movements opposed to the Dual Monarchy. Germany exerted pressure on Austria by insisting the ultimatum be couched in terms strong enough as to make acceptance impossible.

The Tsar urged for an international conference but warned Russia would not remain "indifferent to Serbia's fate". Germany Carte Blanche gave unconditional support and allowed Austria to press for immediate action since "any delay in commencing military operations is regarded... as a great danger because of the interference of other powers". The Russian government advised Serbia to take a conciliatory and co-operative line who agreed to most of Austria's demands but rejected the proposal Austrian participation in an enquiry that breached national sovereignty.

However, the anachronistic Austrian government said it would only accept immediate Serbian acceptance of the original ultimatum as it feared a "weak attitude would discredit our position in Germany's eyes". This absolute insistence assumed that Russia and France were not ready and that of British neutrality because " Britain at this moment is anything but anxious for war, and has no wish whatever to pull the chestnuts out of the fire for Serbia, or in the last instance, for Russia. " Despite Sir Edward Grey's proposed summit in London Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg consistently rejected any attempt at mediation.

Fischer suggested that " as Germany willed and coveted the Austro-Serbian war and, in her confidence in her military superiority, deliberately faced the risk of a conflict with Russia and France. This responsibility [for WW1] is not diminished by the fact that at the last moment Germany tried to arrest the march of destiny, for her efforts to influence Vienna were due exclusively to the threat of British intervention and, even so, they were half-hearted, belated and immediately revoked. " Baron von Sehoen, the German ambassador, was right when he wrote in February 1914: " The bellicose desire for revenge is now outmoded.

It only exists to a certain extent in theory. The wound of 1871 still burns in all French hearts, but nobody is inclined to risk his or his son's bones for the question of Alsace-Lorraine, unless circumstances arose which might open up exceptionally favourable, and reasonably comfortable prospects for the venture. " On August 3rd 1914 France became the victim of unprovoked German aggression. Russia was the first power to mobilise but only to the

Germans did mobilisation imply war since each minute counted lest the Schlieffen Plan was to fail.

The Schieffan Plan planned to rapidly encircle Paris and decapitate the French army before the Russians could launch an offensive in the east. . Every other nation had peaceful alternatives even after the men were called to arms. Memories of horrendous colonial wars drowned in the praise given to brave soldiers or disinterested colonial officers who carried 'the white man's burden' and administered impartial justice to vast populations in remote provinces. The sense of British supremacy was accompanied by an anxiety that the British were losing the cheap goods and services on which Britain's prosperity depended.

The popular daily newspapers whose success was based on sensationalism, promoted jingoism, the glorification of armed forces and widened political tension. There was a condition of almost complete ignorance, as to the implications of 'total' war waged with all the resources of a modern centralised state backed by scientific research. Both rulers and subjects were victims of the 'short war illusion' the dangers of which according to Gordon Greenwood " were increased by the remarkable growth of an emotional national sentiment that in part was the outcome of the prevailing educational systems, a sentiment inflamed by the press and propaganda.

The 'freedom of the seas' for British trade in the English Channel, the significance of food imports from colonies, safeguarding sea links within the Empire, German violation of Belgium neutrality and the invocation of the 1839 Treaty of London propelled Britain into continental war. Faced with the

impossibility of achieving world power and standing by peaceful means, Germany chose war. Britain was preserving the European balance of power against the unmistakable threat of German domination.

An unrestrained Weltpolitik by Germany, isolated her and destroyed the system, upon which she had to rely for security as much as upon her army while the exigencies of continental policy repeatedly imposed themselves upon Germany and restrained her. As Gordon Martel stated " the July crisis was, in essence, an Austro-Russian one and the transformation of that crisis into a world war was the responsibility of Germany. ... Of the five great powers that went to war in August 1914, Britain played the least significant part. Her support, or lack of it, neither encouraged nor restrained Russia and France".