

## The origins of the First World War, 1871-1914

BISMARCK

The outbreak of the First World War in 1914 grew out of a short-term crisis in the Balkans, but any attempt to understand its origins must take account of a number of long-standing developments. For much of the nineteenth century, the major European powers maintained a balance of power. However, between 1871 and 1914 a number of factors served to undermine international stability. First, European powers saw international relations as a battle for survival and as a source of status, and engaged in a fresh outburst of imperialism in Africa and Asia. Second, the rise of Germany in central Europe aroused fear and encouraged the growth of alliances. Third, the expansion of national groups demanding self-determination threatened old empires. The final ingredient which brought war were the fatal decisions of the political leaders during the July Crisis of 1914 in the Balkans. The First World War was really the culmination of a long-drawn-out crisis within the European system.<sup>1</sup>

### The rise of Germany

The rise of Germany was a primary factor which produced tension among the major European powers. The victory of Prussia over France in 1871 concluded the unification of Germany and created a new power at the heart of Europe. As German unification came about - through a combination of crafty diplomacy, industrial strength and military might - this produced anxiety. Contemporaries called it the 'German Question': it revolved around how Germany would behave as the most powerful military and economic power in a reshaped Europe. Fear of Germany served to encourage unease and affected the foreign-policy decisions of Germany's major European rivals.

The startling growth of German power lay at the heart of these concerns. The German population soared from 49 to 66 million between 1890 and 1914, and the economy grew faster than that of any other country in Europe. In 1914, Germany's steel output was higher than that of Britain, France and Russia combined and coal production had risen to second position behind Britain. The prominence of science and technology in the school curriculum gave Germany a notable lead in new, 'high-tech' industries. Germany's industrial strength was used to increase its military strength. The German army, organised on the basis of conscription, was tactically sophisticated, highly trained and well equipped. German naval expansion ensured that Germany's fleet rose from being the sixth largest to the second largest in the world.<sup>2</sup>

The foreign policy of the new Germany, dominated by Otto von Bismarck, the first chancellor of Germany from 1871 to 1890, was designed to reassure Europe that Germany was a 'satisfied' power, with no intention of disrupting the delicate European balance of power. This ingenious style of diplomacy secured a dominant position for Germany in European affairs through the formation of a delicate system of treaties and alliances, which often contained secret clauses.<sup>3</sup> In 1872, the League of the Three Emperors (or *Dreikaiserbund*), consisting of Germany, Russia and Austria-Hungary, was formed. This was followed by the Dual Alliance in 1879 between Germany and Austria-Hungary, which promised mutual assistance in the event of war with Russia. Bismarck believed that the agreement would help restrain the aims of Austria-Hungary in the Balkans, but it had the opposite effect, and encouraged Austria-Hungary to take a bolder stand against Balkan nationalism. The diplomatic position of Germany was further strengthened in Bismarck's time by the formation of a military alliance with Italy in 1882, dubbed the Triple Alliance (of Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy).

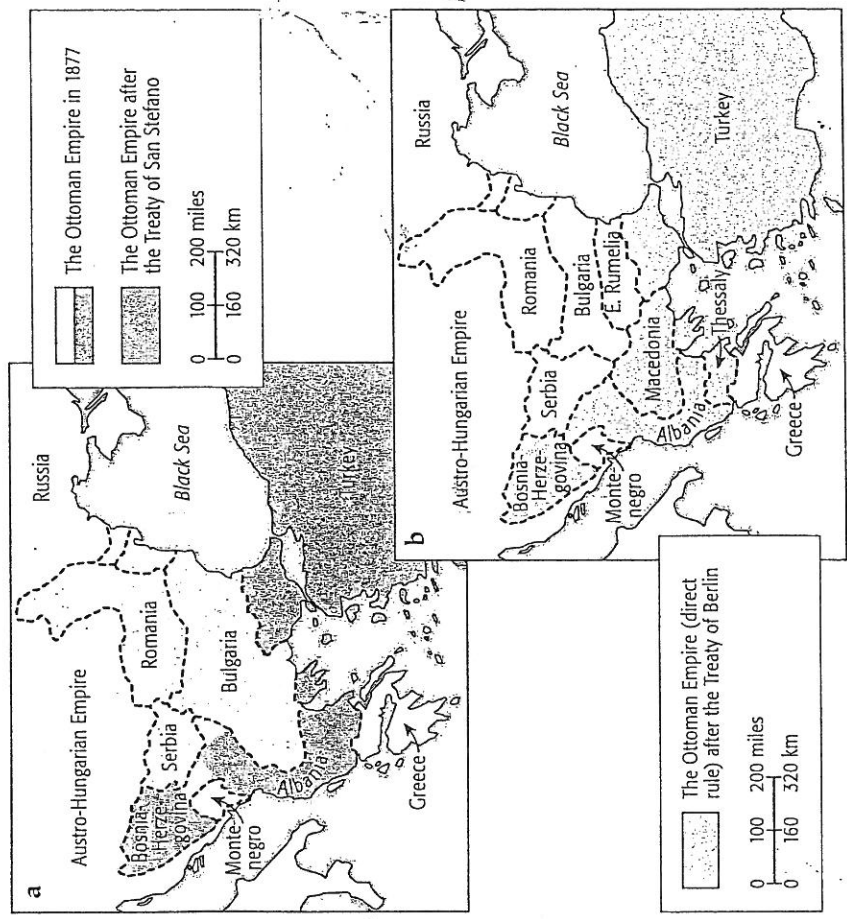
It is now apparent that Bismarck was never firmly committed to his Triple Alliance partners. In 1887, for example, he signed the secret Re-Insurance Treaty with Russia, without the knowledge of Austria-Hungary or Italy, which pledged Russian neutrality in the event of a German attack on France, German neutrality in the event of a Russian attack on Austria-Hungary (a strange clause, given the terms of the Dual Alliance), and a promise that Germany would support Russia's interests in the Balkans. This diplomatic double-dealing was designed to give Germany maximum flexibility and a number of diplomatic options in the event of any international crisis, but it raised suspicions in Austria-Hungary, Russia and Italy. But it seems that Bismarck's duplicity was designed to ensure a peaceful outcome to any future international problems.<sup>4</sup>

### The Bulgarian Crisis and the Balkan problem

Bismarck's desire to be the public ally of Austria-Hungary and the secret ally of Russia foundered during the course of the Bulgarian Crisis of the late nineteenth century. Bulgaria, a group of small, semi-independent states, was one of the most explosive and poorly governed parts of the Ottoman Empire. The key cause of instability was the existence of a wide range of nationalist groups agitating for religious toleration and self-government. In 1876, a full-scale Bulgarian rebellion was under way, with the various nationalist groups receiving support from Serbia, Montenegro and Russia. This crisis eventually escalated into a full-scale war between Russia and Turkey from 1877 to 1878 over the future of Bulgaria, culminating in defeat for the Ottoman Empire, which was forced to sign the Treaty of San Stefano (1878). Under this agreement, Bulgaria was given virtual independence, Serbia and Romania received territory and Russia and Austria-Hungary agreed to supervise reforms in Bosnia-Herzegovina. However, the British and Austro-Hungarian governments believed that the agreement had given Russia too much power

in the Balkans. In the end, Bismarck decided to play 'honest broker' in the crisis, and proposed an international congress in Berlin. Under the Treaty of Berlin (1878), it was agreed that Russia would retain its territorial gains, Serbia, Montenegro and Romania would keep their independence, and Bosnia-Herzegovina would be placed under the exclusive administration of Austria-Hungary.

The settlement of Bulgaria's territory proved more sensitive, and less satisfactory. Bulgaria was turned into an autonomous principality of the Ottoman Empire, with a Christian government and a national army. However, major changes were proposed to its existing boundaries, with the aim of preserving Ottoman power: south and south-west Bulgaria (dubbed 'Big Bulgaria') and Eastern Rumelia were allowed to remain under Ottoman rule. This served to encourage more civil unrest. In 1885, nationalists in Eastern Rumelia revolted against Ottoman rule and demanded the right to join the rest of Bulgaria. The Russian government used the revolt as a pretext to gain further territory. However, Austria-Hungary wanted Bulgaria to remain completely



Map 1. The consequences for the Ottoman Empire and for Bulgaria of the Bulgarian Crisis, 1878: (a) after the Treaty of San Stefano and (b) after the Treaty of Berlin.

independent of tsarist influence and enlisted the support of Bismarck, who sided with the Habsburg monarchy (which presided over the Austro-Hungarian Empire), much to the annoyance of the Tsar, who was forced to withdraw Russian troops from Bulgaria, which remained independent.

The Bulgarian Crisis revealed the complexity of the Balkan problem, which revolved around nationalist demands for self-determination, the gradual decline of Ottoman rule and the designs of Russia and Austria-Hungary. It showed how easily problems in the Balkans could create a delicate international situation. More importantly, the crisis revealed that in any Habsburg-tsarist dispute, Germany was not prepared to see Russia profit. The significance of the Bulgarian Crisis was threefold: it put an end to the League of the Three Emperors; it severely weakened Germany's role as a so-called 'honest broker' in the Balkans; and it killed the Re-Insurance Treaty, which the Russians saw as a worthless and unscrupulous agreement that was not renewed.

Thus, even the shrewd diplomacy of Bismarck foundered on the rocks of the Balkans. The attempt to balance the irreconcilable differences between Austria-Hungary and Russia was really an exercise in crisis management rather than a real solution to the conflict between the two powers in the region. Even so, Bismarck's fall from power in 1890 is still viewed as a key turning point on the road to war. After all, the German leaders who followed him favoured confrontation over conciliation. Obviously, Bismarck's cautious policy was successful in the short term, but there is no guarantee that he would have continued to adopt such a conciliatory line had he remained in office. He was already coming under increasing pressure to adopt a popular aggressive and expansionist foreign policy before his abrupt dismissal by the young Kaiser Wilhelm II. Paradoxically, the fact that Bismarck's alliance diplomacy had placed Germany in such a strong diplomatic position actually encouraged other, less shrewd German figures in the aristocracy, army and navy to push

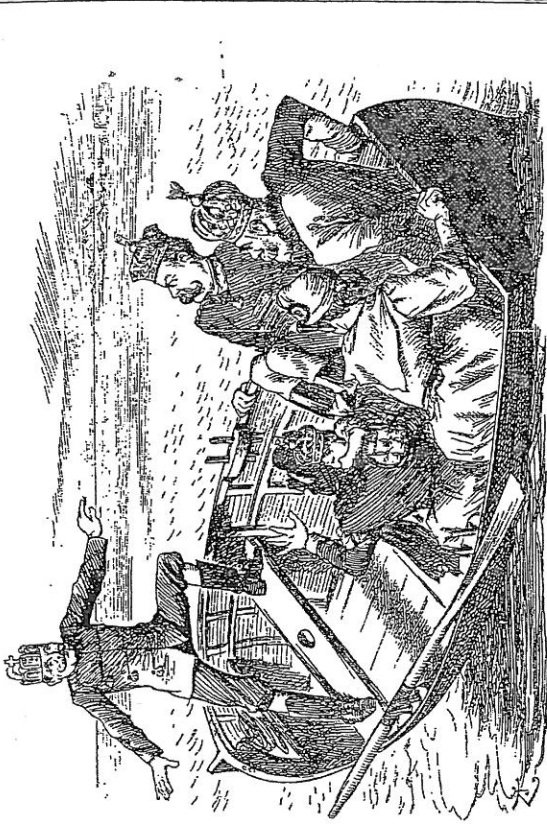
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### Kaiser Wilhelm, German world policy and German aims

The desire for a bold new approach to foreign policy was most noticeable in Germany. In 1897, Kaiser Wilhelm II announced that Germany would adopt a 'world policy' (*Weltpolitik*). The logic behind *Weltpolitik* seemed reasonable enough: the Kaiser claimed that German industrial expansion was so dependent on imports of raw materials from overseas that a vast colonial empire was required, with a large navy to support it. Thus, *Weltpolitik* was committed to a large programme of naval expansion and heavy involvement in colonial affairs. However, this abrupt change in German policy, from the prudence of Bismarck to the confrontational style of Kaiser Wilhelm, marks a crucial turning point in Germany's foreign policy in the years which led to war.<sup>8</sup> The reasons why Kaiser Wilhelm opted for *Weltpolitik* have been the subject of enormous debate. The timing of the policy is usually put down to the appointment by the Kaiser of von Bülow as chancellor, and Admiral von Tirpitz as naval minister, who both favoured an expansionist foreign policy with three key aims.

- 1 To build a German navy which would match the best in the world. It was hoped that a strong German navy would encourage Britain to opt for neutrality in any future European war.
- 2 To make Germany a major imperial power. This implied territorial expansion overseas.
- 3 To use foreign-policy issues to increase support for authoritarian rule. This would weaken the appeal of socialism and democracy.

The real problem was that the Kaiser, the chancellor and leading foreign, military and naval advisers appeared to pursue perhaps one, but never all of these aims at any one time. The result was a lack of co-ordination in foreign policy, and a great deal of confusion over whether *Weltpolitik* was a genuine attempt to find Germany 'a place in the sun' or whether it was merely a useful political tactic to weaken the domestic appeal of social democracy at home.



L'ENFANT TERRIBLE!

CHANCE IN THE HANDS. "DON'T GO OF LIKE THAT—OH YOU'D UPSET US ALL!"

A *Punch* cartoon of 1890 shows the new Kaiser with representatives of Russia, Britain, France and Austria-Hungary. What point is the cartoonist trying to make?

The rhetoric used by German leaders in pursuit of *Weltpolitik* was often daring and confrontational. The German government engaged in a clear orchestration of patriotism. The German press, heavily influenced by the Kaiser's press office, whipped up jingoism and fomented antagonism against other nations. Nationalist pressure groups, including the Navy League, the Colonial Society and the Pan-German League, supported *Weltpolitik*. German history books venerated great German conquests of the past. The Kaiser often saw *Weltpolitik* as a means of warding off the rise of socialism in Germany by diverting attention towards external issues. Admiral von Tirpitz, the prime mover in building the German navy, was fully aware that a naval race could act as a rallying point for German public opinion in support of the existing authoritarian government. The success or failure of *Weltpolitik* therefore became a central issue in German domestic politics.<sup>9</sup>

The policy created a great deal of tension, accomplished very little, and soured international relations. In the view of Bethmann Hollweg, the German chancellor who replaced von Bülow, *Weltpolitik* had 'challenged everybody, got in everybody's way but actually weakened nobody'. The Kaiser never contemplated the conflict that a bold, expansionist Germany foreign policy would provoke abroad. The major world powers had no intention of smoothing the path for Germany to become a dominant world power and Germany met

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hostility in every direction. The British engaged in a naval race and maintained supremacy. The USA thwarted German ambitions in Venezuela and the Philippines, the British and French obstructed German ambitions in Morocco, and the British and French denied Germany capital to build the Berlin-Baghdad Railway. All the major European powers ganged up together to ensure that Germany made no significant economic gains in China in 1900. The only territorial gains that Germany made in its search for *Weltpolitik* were small gains in the Congo, a 99-year lease on Kiao-chow in China, two small Samoan islands, some small Pacific islands and a fleet of costly dreadnought battleships, which were not used in battle during the First World War, except at the Battle of Jutland. *Weltpolitik* is a classic case of ambition outweighing common sense. The German government wasted a great deal of effort in pursuing a policy which was both costly and led other European powers to regard Germany as a real danger to European peace.