

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

Geopolitical Actions of the German Empire
Prior to the First World War
– A Modified DIME Analysis –

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Germania auf der Wacht am Rhein – Hermann Wislicenus 1873-74¹

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Abstract

It is said that the victors write the history.¹ That adage is demonstrably true for the history of the First World War. The German Empire, *Das Deutsche Kaiserreich*, has shouldered most of the blame for the war for most of the past century. Article 231 of the Treaty of Versailles declares this German guilt in no uncertain terms. But is this a fair assessment?

A study of pre-war German diplomatic and military actions provides a method to partially assess the culpability of Germany for the Great War. A fair analysis of that geopolitical activity shows that the actions of the German Empire were in accordance with normal and accepted policies and methods of other Great Power European countries of that time. The German actions were directed at protecting the Reich and enhancing Germany's presence on the world stage, not at aggression towards other states. This manner of international interaction is not consistent with a long-term strategy aimed at initiating major warfare. This paper is an important addition to the historiography on the subject of German responsibility for the First World War because of its demonstration of the conventionality of Germany's pre-war policies and activities.

A modified DIME model (diplomatic-informational-military-economic with the addition of a social aspect to the model) is used as the organizational method of discussion and analysis. This specific model may be referred to as a DIMES model.

¹ Although this quote is often attributed to Winston Churchill, it has been attested as being in use long before Churchill was alive. See Matthew Phelan, "The History of 'The History Is Written by the Victors,'" Slate, 26 Nov 2019, <https://slate.com/culture/2019/11/history-is-written-by-the-victors-quote-origin.html>

Dramatis Personae (Selected- of significance to this paper)

<u>Country</u>	<u>Position</u>	<u>Name</u>	<u>Dates in Position</u>
Germany	Emperor (Kaiser)	Wilhelm I	1871-1888
		Wilhelm II	1888-1918
	Chancellor <i>Reichskanzler</i>	Otto von Bismarck	1871-90
		Leo von Caprivi	1890-94
		Chlodwig Hohenlohe-Schillingsfürst	1894-1900
		Bernhard von Bülow	1900-09
	Secretary for Foreign Affairs	Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg	1909-17
		Bernhard Ernst von Bülow	1873-79
		Herbert von Bismarck	1886-90
		Bernhard von Bülow	1897-1900
		Alfred von Kiderlen-Wächter	1910-12
	Foreign Office Political Dep't	Friedrich von Holstein	1876-1906
	Naval Secretary	Alfred von Tirpitz	1897-1916
	Chief of Great General Staff <i>Chef des Großer Generalstab</i>	Helmut von Moltke (the Elder Uncle)	1858-88
		Alfred von Waldersee	1888-1891
		Alfred von Schlieffen	1891-1905
		Helmut von Moltke (the Younger Nephew)	1905-14
	Prussian War Minister <i>Preussisches Kriegsministerium</i>	Karl von Einem	1903-09
		Josias von Heeringen	1909-13
Austro-Hungary	Emperor	Franz Joseph	1848-1916
	Archduke	Franz Ferdinand	1889-1914
	Chief of General Staff	Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf	1906-17
	Foreign Minister	Leopold Berchtold	1912-1915
Russia	Tsar	Alexander II	1855-81
		Alexander III	1881-94
		Nicholas II	1894-1917
France	President	Raymond Poincaré	1913-20
	Prime Minister	Raymond Poincaré	1912-13
	Chief of General Staff	Joseph Joffre	1911-16
	Foreign Minister	Théophile Delcassé	1898-1905
		Raymond Poincaré	1912-13
Great Britain		Charles Jonnart	1913
	Queen	Victoria	1837-1901
	King	Edward VII	1901-10
		George V	1910-36
	Chancellor for the Exchequer	David Lloyd George	1908-15
	Foreign Secretary	Edward Grey	1905-16
	Foreign Off. Asst. Undersec.	Eyre Crowe	1912-19

Glossary of Selected Terminology

Attaque à outrance: An all-out assault

Aussenpolitik: Foreign Policy

Blut und Eisen: Blood and iron, the symbolization of the immaterial German spirit or *Geist* as material items.

Chef des Großer Generalstab: Chief of the Greater General Staff

Deutsches Heer or *Deutsches Reichsheer*: German army or German Imperial Army

Dreikaiserjahr: Year of the Three Emperors (1888)

Dreikaiserbund: League of the Three Emperors

Einigungskriegen: Wars of Unification

Einkreisung: Encirclement

Geist: Spirit

Großer Generalstab: Great General Staff

Guerre à outrance: A war characterized by the *attaque à outrance*.

Innenpolitik: Domestic Policy

Julikrisis: The July Crisis. The period of diplomacy after the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand until the beginning of the First World War.

Kabinettskrieg: Set piece “gentleman’s” war involving only military formations of the combatants. These conflicts were limited in scope and outcome and did not involve the common citizen.

Kaiser: The German emperor during the Second Reich- 1871-1918

Kaiserreich: The German Empire, the Second Reich of 1871-1918, *das Zweites Reich*.

Kaiserliche Marine: German imperial navy

Langer Kampf: Long struggle, long war

Oberste Heeresleitung (OHL): Chief of General Staff of the German Imperial Army

Preussisches Kriegsministerium: Prussian War Ministry

Reich: Empire

Reichskanzler: Imperial German chancellor

Schwerpunkt: Directing and concentrating one's forces at the point of main attack. May be used tactically or strategically.

Sonderweg: Special or unique path. The *Sonderweg* theory is that the German people have progressed and developed in a way that is unique from their neighbors.

Vaterland: Fatherland, Germany, *das Reich*

Vernichtungsschlacht: Battle of annihilation

Vernichtungskrieg: War of annihilation

Volkskrieg: People's war. War that encompasses not only the military, but also the common people of a nation. Can be thought of as total war (*Totale Krieg*).

Weltmacht: World power

Weltpolitik: World policy or politics

Wilhelmine Germany: The period of the German Second Reich during which Wilhelm II was kaiser. (From 1888 through the end of the First World War)

Zweibund: Dual Alliance

Zweifrontenkrieg: War on two fronts

Zweites Reich: The Second Reich, the German Empire of 1871-1918, *das Kaiserreich*.



Chapter One: Introduction and Historiography

Section One – Introduction

“It is true that the best way to know things is through their causes.”
Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz¹

This quote from Leibniz encapsulates the direction and purpose of this paper which is not simply to relate a series of historical events, but to investigate and analyze those events as agents of causation. The objective of that investigation is to ascertain whether Imperial Germany comported itself appropriately in its geopolitical activities in the years prior to the First World War and what the effects of those activities were in moving the continent towards war.

This limited approach cannot be construed as to be able to make a full determination as to Germany’s culpability for the Great War. It will, though, shed much light on whether the stances and decisions taken by Germany were in any way in contravention to proper statesmanlike conduct, deviating from what would be considered customary or conventional as compared to other European countries, and creating an environment likely to engender confrontation and even warfare. In other words, did the German Empire comport itself in a way that eventuated in it being responsible for “causing all the loss and damage to which the Allied and Associated Governments and their nationals have been subjected as a consequence of the war”² and thereby meriting the century-long opprobrium it has received? If Germany is to be properly blamed as the primary cause of the war, then Germany’s actions in the years leading up to the war should be able to be shown to be consistently hostile, threatening, or bellicose. If Germany’s actions are

¹ Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, “Remarks on Malebranche’s Opinion that We See All Things in God, with References to Locke’s Examination of It,” in *Leibniz: Selections*, ed. Philip P. Wiener (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1951, original published 1708), 501.

² *Treaty of Peace with Germany* (Washington, D.C: Government Printing Office, 1919), 249.

shown to be rational and appropriate, then it is not reasonable for the German Empire to be made to answer for a preponderant and disproportionate share of war guilt.

The thesis of this paper is that the geopolitical actions of the German Empire of the latter nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were consistent with, comparable to, and no different than the geopolitical actions of other contemporary large European states. The German actions were directed at protecting the encircled German state, not at aggression towards other countries. As such, the *Kaiserreich* bears no unique culpability for the First World War. It therefore has unduly borne the reproach and censure of the world community for a totality of responsibility which should be apportioned more equally.

This paper will show that, in the years leading up to the war, the powers of the Triple Entente (France, Russia, and Great Britain) reacted negatively to the newly-unified German state, resentful of the explosive growth of the German economy, the rapidly advancing influence of Germany in the scientific world, and growing German geopolitical strength. Threatened by this German success, these countries, France and Russia particularly, began a consistent process to build alliances to thwart German efforts and to isolate Germany geopolitically. These powers had been accustomed to, and much preferred, a fragmented and divided collection of smaller German states and principalities that were as much a threat to each other as they were to any other political entity.

The historical significance of this topic is of vast importance in the history not only of Europe, but of the world, over the past one-hundred fifty years. No historical event occurs in isolation from the events which precede it or occur contemporaneously. Every historical event influences those which succeed it. The striking clarity of Article 231 of the Treaty of Versailles

and the attitudes and mindsets which produced it led to the harsh treatment of Germany after the war and set the template from which the far more catastrophic events of the next decades arose.

This paper will use a modified DIME model as a method of analysis. The DIME model is an integrative methodology which incorporates what are widely considered the four basic national instruments of power: diplomatic, informational, military, economic.³ To these four basic elements, this paper will also add a social component. This augmented model may be referred to as a DIMES model. The constituent elements of the DIMES analysis are:

Diplomatic: Ambassadors, embassies, treaties, alliances, policy, negotiations.

Informational: Public media, propaganda, announcements.

Military: Military philosophy, operations, technology, force structure, strategy

Economic: Policy, statistics, economic strength.

Social: Demographics, religion, state of the culture, public attitudes, philosophical mindsets, ideologies (socialism and nationalism), the state of art in all forms.⁴

Further analysis of data may be obtained by refining information structured in a DIMES model by use of the ASCOPE analytic framework. This will be discussed further in the Concluding Remarks.

The integrative aspect of the DIMES methodology acknowledges that each of the components might, and usually does, affect the other components. Keeping these interrelationships ever in mind is important in analyzing actions of foreign policy. Foreign policy is not conducted in a vacuum that only considers the international aspects of the actions taken. The politics of the domestic environment (*Innenpolitik*) has a great effect on how foreign policy (*Aussenpolitik*) is conducted. This will be discussed in more detail below.

³ Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Doctrine Note 1-18- Strategy* (Washington, D.C.: Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Publications, 25 April 2018) https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/jdn_jg/jdn1_18.pdf, vii.

⁴ The Lightning Press, "The Instruments of National Power," accessed 30 August 2023, <https://www.thelightningpress.com/the-instruments-of-national-power/>

Although this paper will be focused primarily on the German geopolitical (diplomatic and military) movements of the decades of the German Empire, it will be useful to first briefly review the other aspects of the DIMES model. Doing so will help establish the social, economic, and informational milieu in which German Imperial geopolitics transpired and which acted to help shape them.

Section Two – Historiography

As with many occurrences of major historical import, the history and analysis of the Great War, its antecedent events, and causation began to be written during the events themselves.

The focus of this paper is the geopolitical actions of the German Empire prior to the First World War. Scrutinizing these maneuvers is a means of partially discerning the culpability of the German Empire as to causation of the First World War. It is an analysis of the initiatives and responses of the Second Reich to the geopolitical circumstances in which it found itself. From this, one may illuminate the role these actions played in developing an environment which begat the outbreak of war in 1914.

As per these explanatory comments, one may note that the significance of looking at the historiography is in ascertaining each author's evaluation of the developing and ultimate culpability for the outbreak of the First World War.

When reviewing this historiography, there are considerations specific to the subject of pre-First World War activities of which one must be aware.

First, one must understand the perspective from which the historian is writing. One may wonder if the experience of the Second World War colored the histories of the First World War written in the mid-twentieth century. At that time blame for the First World War was being unrestrainedly heaped, like coals, onto the head of Germany. Anti-German feelings were

widespread and pervasive in non-German countries. But one wonders if German historians were affected also.

It may be observed that much of the vitriol egested in the literature came in the mid-twentieth century and a bit later from German researchers. One wonders how much of the guilt these researchers credit to Germany's account for the cause of the First World War can be attributed to feelings of shame or remorse for the actions of Germany during the Second World War. Were these historians writing from a position of either personal or national guilt? Fritz Fischer, who held Germany fully responsible for the First World War and for whom the Ficherite School of First World War historians is named, served in the Wehrmacht during the Second World War.⁵ Did this influence his scholarship?

"The victor writes the history" is a quote often attributed to Winston Churchill, but its actual origins are not known.⁶ Those writing from a non-German perspective might feel they have reason to pin the war on Germany, the dreaded Hun, and exonerate the actions of their own countries. And those writing in the decades just after the Second World War might feel an even stronger urge to impugn Germany for actions even prior to the First World War.

But, if Germany were made to assume a greater share of accountability than it deserved, this would then lend credence to the argument that its anger at the onerous and oppressive reparations and at the post-war occupations of the Rhineland and of the Ruhr was justifiable. And if the anger of the German people was justifiable, one might reason that some of the later aggressive behavior of Germany might not be wholly indefensible.

⁵ Hartmut Pogge von Strandmann, "Obituary: Professor Fritz Fischer," *The Independent*, 13 December 1999, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/obituary-professor-fritz-fischer-1132151.html>

⁶ See FN 1, page 1.

One last issue must be considered. Did the ongoing Cold War, especially during its peak in the 1950s and 1960s, affect the writing of First World War history? During the mid-twentieth century, there was great sensitivity on all sides as to how any and all things might affect the world geopolitical balance. The divided German nation of that time was a primary hub around which much geopolitical machination revolved.

In the USSR, beginning at the time of the communist takeover, a fine line had to be walked by historians. They wished to heap blame on Germany, but that would lessen the culpability of the tsar's government, which they wished to impeach and incriminate as well. A delicate and tactful balance had to be achieved.

In the face of all of these possible flies that might alight in our historical ointment, one may at least hope that historians are able to practice reasonable objectivity, even if one must accept that it is unlikely that complete neutrality and lack of bias might be achieved in historical scholarship.⁷

The historiography of the First World War is extensive. As noted above, the writing of the war's history began before the last shot was fired and before the final shell was launched. This includes commentaries on and analysis of pre-war events and policies, as well as the war itself. Many of these writings, as well as the publication of documents and texts of communications, were meant as exculpatory evidence and argument for one belligerent while simultaneously directed at being inculpatory towards another.

⁷ For commentary on bias, neutrality, and objectivity in general see Carl R. Trueman, *Histories and Fallacies* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 27-28. For a succinct discussion on matters pertaining to the First World War, see Jack S. Levy and John A. Vasquez, "Introduction: Historians, Political Scientists, and the Causes of the First World War," in *The Outbreak of the First World War: Structure, Politics, and Decision-Making*, ed. Jack S. Levy and John A. Vasquez (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 13-15.

One early writer was James M. Beck, an American constitutional scholar, United States Solicitor General, and prominent member of the House of Representatives. In 1915, in the first full year of the ongoing war, Beck published *The Evidence in the Case* in which he laid out, in a lawyerly manner, the evidence of culpability for the war as he saw it. He was quick to condemn Germany as the main instigator of the war. Beck charged that the German Empire had developed an “arrogant pride” and that its “whole statecraft” since the Wars of Unification had been “inspired by an exaggerated apprehension of the intentions of its great neighbors.”⁸ This “acute and neurotic apprehension” was first directed at France, then Russia, and finally England and caused Germany many missteps in foreign policy and finally to spark a world conflagration.⁹

The primary target of Beck’s denunciations is the Prussian *Junkerklasse*. He gives something of a pass to the German *Volk*: “This detestable war is not merely a crime against civilization, but also against the deceived and misled German people.”¹⁰

At one point, Beck places a measure of blame on other countries’ doorsteps. Sounding rather like the collective responsibility argument that first surfaced in the 1920s and 1930s, he remarked that “the curse of modern statecraft is the largely unreasoning fear which all nations have of their neighbors...this nervous apprehension has bred jealousy, hatred, suspicion, until to-day all civilized nations are reaping a harvest horrible beyond expression.”¹¹

At the same time, the German political economist Werner Sombart had quite a different take on the still ongoing war. In his 1915 *Händler und Helden* (Traders and Heroes), directed

⁸ James M. Beck, *The Evidence in the Case* (New York and London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1915), xx-xxi.

⁹ Beck, *The Evidence in the Case*, xxi-xxii.

¹⁰ Beck, *The Evidence in the Case*, xxvi.

¹¹ Beck, *The Evidence in the Case*, xxi.

mostly at the English, he described the Germans as heroes fighting against an evil mercantile commercialism.¹²

The hyperventilating prose of both Beck and Sombart came from a place of emotion, not fully informed reason. At the time when both of them were writing, neither Beck nor Sombart had access to the extent of information needed to make a conversant argument *au fait*.

Much more widely known for its defense of German actions was the 4 October 1914 “*Aufruf ‘An die Kulturwelt!’*” (Appeal to the World of Culture). Otherwise known as the “Manifesto of the Ninety-Three,” it was a joint statement of ninety-three leading German scholars and artists. Six times it made the statement “*es ist nicht wahr*” (it is not true), denying, for example, that the Germans had no right to enter Belgium or that its troops participated in atrocities.¹³ This *Aufruf* is a defense against charges that the Germans were not a *Kulturvolk*,¹⁴ but barbarians. It was a defense against the type of thinking that later caused Germans to be labeled as Huns. It was also a defense made in the heat of the moment with no real knowledge of what was really going on in Belgium and France.

The Zimmerwald Conference of 1915 was a meeting in Switzerland of radicals and communists from ten countries that included Leon Trotsky and Vladimir Lenin. The manifesto produced by this meeting laid blame on “the ruling powers of capitalist society.” It was influential in socialist-leaning circles and denounced the war as “the outcome of imperialism, of the endeavors of the capitalist classes of every nation to satisfy their greed for profit.”¹⁵ Marxist

¹² Erik Grimmer-Solem, “Sombart, Werner,” 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. Ute Daniel et al., Freie Universität Berlin, last modified 26 Oct 2022, DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.11579.

¹³ Professors of Germany, “To the Civilized World,” *The North American Review* 210, no. 765 (1919): 284–87 and “Defense of the German Cause in World War I,” in *Documents of German History*, ed. Louis L. Snyder (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1958), 356–58.

¹⁴ Jo Fox, “Making Sense of the War,” 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. Ute Daniel et al., Freie Universität Berlin, last modified 4 Feb 2016, DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.10822.

¹⁵ William Mulligan, “The Historiography of the Origins of the First World War,” 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. Ute Daniel et al., Freie Universität Berlin, last modified 30

commentaries and histories were much more interested in blaming the capitalist system than they were in blaming individuals or countries.

In Article 231 of the Treaty of Versailles, Germany was explicitly labeled as the sole cause of the war and was made to acknowledge this statement and accept full responsibility.

This article is the so-called ‘war guilt clause.’ It left little room for debate:

Germany accepts the responsibility of Germany and her allies for causing all the loss and damage to which the Allied and Associated Governments and their nationals have been subjected as a consequence of the war imposed upon them by the aggression of Germany and her allies.¹⁶

But debate did begin within a fairly short time. Soon scholars of many nationalities began to question the comprehensive and exclusive characterization of German guilt.

The American historian Sidney Bradshaw Fay, in a 1920-21 series of three articles in *The American Historical Review*, did not exonerate Germany by any means, but he did describe how the actions of other countries and the alliance/entente systems were also to blame for the war.¹⁷

This analysis began consideration of the collective responsibility argument.

By the mid-1920s, full-length histories appeared which held that persons and countries and/or conditions other than or in addition to Germany were accountable for the war. Some were in response to the simplistic ‘blame it all on Germany’ approach. Others, such as the French

Nov 2016, DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.11016; World Socialist Web Site, “Appendix 3: The Zimmerwald Manifesto,” accessed 29 Sept 2023, <https://www.wsws.org/en/special/library/war-and-the-international-leon-trotsky-1914/15.html>; and Bernard Degen, “Zimmerwald Conference,” 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. Ute Daniel et al., Freie Universität Berlin, last modified 29 Jan 2019, DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.11335.

¹⁶ *The Treaty of Versailles* (New York: American Association for International Conciliation, 1919), 123; German History in Documents and Images, “The Official Responsibility: The Treaty of Versailles, Article 231 (June 28, 1919),” Wilhelmine Germany and the First World War (1890-1918), https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=798; Lisa L. Beckenbaugh, *Treaty of Versailles: A Primary Document Analysis* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2019), 121; and *Treaty of Peace with Germany*, 249.

¹⁷ Sidney B. Fay, “New Light on the Origins of the World War, I. Berlin and Vienna, to July 29,” *The American Historical Review* 25 no. 4 (July 1920): 616-39; Sidney B. Fay, “New Light on the Origins of the World War, II. Berlin and Vienna, July 29 to 31,” *The American Historical Review* 26 no. 1 (1920): 37-53; and Sidney B. Fay, “New Light on the Origins of the War, III. Russia and the Other Powers,” *The American Historical Review* 26 no. 2 (1921): 225-54.

historian Pierre Renouvin, still saw Germany as mainly at fault, but sought to consider ideas and viewpoints from a much broader perspective, thereby allowing other influences to have some consequential effects on the discussion.¹⁸

In 1926, Erich Brandenburg, a professor of modern history at the University of Leipzig, laid the lion's share of the blame for the war at the feet of France and Russia, stating plainly that "It was they, not Germany, who wished for conquests at the expense of others."¹⁹

Brandenburg chastised the 'war parties' of both countries, the French for their persistent *revanche* and the Russians for their desire to control the Turkish Straits and for their militant Pan-Slavism and its attendant irredentism. In his book *From Bismarck to the World War*, he specifically points to French president/former foreign minister Raymond Poincaré and Russian ambassador to France Alexander Izvolsky as having the great personal responsibility for the war.²⁰

But although Professor Brandenburg avers that the Germany's aims were peaceful, he consistently criticizes the German government for its sometimes haughty and overly-confident attitude, its unsuccessful and poorly reasoned diplomatic machinations, and its "short sightedness, lack of method, want of forethought and of understanding of the psychology of other peoples."²¹ His description of German foreign policy is that of a bull in a china shop- not wanting to break things, but unable to help itself.

¹⁸ Ernst Breisach, *Historiography – Ancient, Medieval, and Modern* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 332. Also see Pierre Renouvin, *The Immediate Origins of the War (28th June-4th August 1914)*, trans. Theodore Carswell Hume (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1928), 2-11.

¹⁹ Erich Brandenburg, *From Bismarck to the World War: A History of German Foreign Policy 1870-1914*, trans. Annie Elizabeth Adams (London: Oxford University Press, 1926), 521.

²⁰ Brandenburg, *From Bismarck to the World War*, 520-21.

²¹ Brandenburg, *From Bismarck to the World War*, 518.

Brandenburg also cites the arachnoid web of alliances, agreements, ententes, and *détentes* for producing a situation in which any disagreement would quickly draw all countries into a war and the “friction and conflict” caused by the scramble for colonies.²²

In a similar vein and also in 1926, Harry Elmer Barnes, in his *The Genesis of the World War*, placed the greatest blame on the Franco-Russian alliance that had acted to draw Germany and Austria-Hungary into the war.²³ Sidney Fay’s early writings had made Barnes begin to question the sole verdict against Germany. Barne’s investigation into the documents being released post-war from each of the countries involved, as well as interviews conducted with many of the main decision-makers, further convinced him of his thesis identifying the Franco-Russian alliance as the main driver of the war.²⁴

Barnes work has touched many a raw nerve over the years, with A.J.P. Taylor referring to it as “preposterously pro-German.”²⁵ In an unfavorable review of the book later in 1926, fellow historian Bernadotte Schmitt wrote that the “book falls short of being that objective and scientific analysis of the great problem which is so urgently needed (and) as an attempt to set up a new doctrine of unique French-Russian responsibility, it must be unhesitatingly rejected.”²⁶

In 1928, Sidney Fay further entered the fray with his monumental two-volume *The Origins of the World War*, in which he doled out blame for the war to all of the parties involved, expressing the soon-to-be orthodox idea of ‘collective responsibility’ for the war. With a collective responsibility mindset, it is only a small step to ‘inadvertence,’ the idea that the war could not be avoided, that its occurrence was an historical necessity, and therefore that blaming

²² Brandenburg, *From Bismarck to the World War*, 514-15.

²³ Harry Elmer Barnes, *The Genesis of the World War: An Introduction to the Problem of War Guilt* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1926), xiii.

²⁴ Barnes, *The Genesis of the World War*, vii.

²⁵ A. J. P. Taylor, *War by Time-Table: How the First World War Began* (London: Macdonald & Co., 1969), 126.

²⁶ Bernadotte E. Schmitt, “July 1914,” *Foreign Affairs* 5, no. 1 (1926): 147.

any country in particular was a fool's errand.²⁷ Fay argues that none of the European countries wanted war, but all were guilty of some degree of brinkmanship and failure to do what was needed to avoid conflict.²⁸

Bernadotte Schmitt reviewed Fay's book along with those by Pierre Renouvin and two others in *The Journal of Modern History* in 1929. He found it lacking in several respects and lamented that "the failure of four fair-minded men, using the same materials, to reach a reasonable harmony of views or even a consistent statement of facts, is somewhat melancholy, though perhaps hardly surprising."²⁹

Schmitt published his answer to this confusion over the facts of the war in 1930. *The Coming of the War, 1914*, was a two-volume history that tried to redirect blame and responsibility back at the *Kaiserreich*.³⁰ He seems to have had some success in this regard as the German foreign ministry attempted to discredit it.³¹ At this juncture, though, Schmitt's views were being overshadowed by the idea of 'collective responsibility.'

Former British Prime Minister David Lloyd George, in the first volume of his 1933 *War Memoirs of David Lloyd George*, famously opined that "the nations slithered over the brink into the boiling cauldron of war without any trace of apprehension or dismay,"³² and "one can see now clearly that not one of them wanted war; certainly not on this scale."³³ Lloyd George

²⁷ Sidney Bradshaw Fay, *The Origins of the World War*, Vol. 1 & 2 (New York: Macmillan Co, 1928).

²⁸ Frank McDonough, *The Origins of the First and Second World Wars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 24, and Louise Chipley Slavicek, *The Treaty of Versailles* (New York: Chelsea House Publications, 2010), 19-20.

²⁹ Bernadotte E. Schmitt, "The Origins of the War," *The Journal of Modern History* 1, no. 1 (1929): 119.

³⁰ Bernadotte E. Schmitt, *The Coming of the War, 1914*, Vol. 1 & 2. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1930.

³¹ Samuel R. Williamson Jr. and Ernest R. May, "An Identity of Opinion: Historians and July 1914," *The Journal of Modern History* 79, no. 2 (2007): 335. Also see Ellen L. Evans and Joseph O. Baylen, "History as Propaganda: The German Foreign Ministry and the 'Enlightenment' of American Historians on the War-Guilt Question, 1930-1933," in *Forging the Collective Memory: Government and International Historians Through Two World Wars*, ed. Keith Wilson (New York: Berghahn Books, 1996), 151-77.

³² David Lloyd George, *War Memoirs of David Lloyd George*, Vol. 1 (London: Ivor Nicholson & Watson, 1933), 52.

³³ Lloyd George, *War Memoirs of David Lloyd George*, Vol. 1., 55.

seemed to believe that no single nation was specifically at fault, but the war began due to the serpentine geopolitical climate of the time. These statements also touched on the notion of inadvertence, that the war was going to occur no matter what any one actor did, or could do, to prevent it.

In spite of this reasoning that the war was destined to occur, Lloyd George does hold one person more at fault than others: that “foolish Berchtold, the Austrian premier, upon whom must be fixed the chief personal responsibility for most of what happened.”³⁴

In 1936, the prominent British historian G.P. Gooch, who had been one of two main editors of the *British Documents on the Origins of the War 1898-1914*,³⁵ released the first of two volumes of his *Before the War: Studies in Diplomacy*. (The second volume came in 1938.) In the second volume he stated “that any single statesman or nation was the sole criminal is no longer seriously believed.”³⁶ The culprits he blamed for the war were “the European anarchy, the absence of international machinery, the doctrine of the unfettered sovereign national state, the universal assumption that the graver disputes could only be settled by the sword.”³⁷ For Gooch, it was not actually the people taking decisions who were to blame, but the systems in which they had to function.

³⁴ Lloyd George, *War Memoirs of David Lloyd George*, Vol. 1., 55. Max Hastings, in his history *Catastrophe 1914*, also lays a great amount of responsibility for the war at the feet of Berchtold. He describes how Berchtold lied to Franz Joseph to induce the emperor to sign mobilization orders. In a subsequent chapter, Hastings labels Berchtold the ‘begetter of the war.’ See Max Hastings, *Catastrophe 1914: Europe Goes to War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013), 63, 386.

³⁵ G. P. Gooch and Harold Temperley, ed., *British Documents on the Origins of the War 1898-1914* (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1928).

³⁶ George Peabody Gooch, *Before the War: Studies in Diplomacy*, Vol. 2, *The Coming of the Storm* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1938), v.

³⁷ Gooch, *Before the War: Studies in Diplomacy*, Vol. 2, vi.

Collective responsibility for the war thus became the accepted mainstream analysis. The investigation of long-term etiologies of the war as opposed to attempts to ascribe blame for the war became the focus of research.³⁸

The idea of collective responsibility was bolstered in 1951 at a conference of German and French historians charged with the task of finding some agreement as to the cause of the Great War for the purpose of textbook reform. The collaborative conference came to a joint declaration, part of which pronounced:

German policy in 1914 did not aim for the unleashing of a European war; it was primarily determined by the alliance obligations vis-a-vis Austria-Hungary. ...Certain circles in the German General Staff believed Germany's chances of victory were greater in 1914 than in the following years; such considerations did not, however, determine the policy of the German government.³⁹

One must remember that the German participants at the conference were *West German* historians; Germany was a divided state for over four decades after the Second World War. In communist East Germany, historians were quick to blame what they saw as the bourgeois Second Reich with its connections to the fascist Third Reich and now to the capitalist West German Bund.⁴⁰

The most prominent German historian present at the conference was Gerhard Ritter, a First World War infantry veteran who had “launched his academic career publishing varied books that reflected his vision of an ideal German state rooted in authoritarian government and traditional social values.” Ritter’s idea of an authoritarian government, though, was based on

³⁸ Pierre Renouvin discussed the need for this early on. See Renouvin, *The Immediate Origins of the War*, 11.

³⁹ Franco-German Historians' Commission, 1951, as quoted in Annika Mombauer, *The Origins of the First World War: Controversies and Consensus* (Longman: London, 2002), 121.

⁴⁰ Mombauer, *The Origins of the First World War*, 121-22.

traditional aristocracy. He had had no fondness for the Nazi regime and was arrested after the failed July Plot for his anti-Hitler views, spending a number of months in prison.⁴¹

Ritter consistently and passionately defended his thesis that Germany was not solely responsible for the war, that most other major European countries were also answerable for their pre-war conduct, and that the war was, in many senses, unavoidable. This was reminiscent of the arguments of David Lloyd George.

A differing opinion was expressed by the Italian historian Luigi Albertini (1871-1941) in his three-volume study, *The Origins of the War of 1914*.⁴² It was published in Italian in 1941 but only translated into English a decade later. As such, it was mostly unknown until the 1950s. (Interestingly, it has still not been translated into German.⁴³) Albertini's thesis was that the war was the result of decisions and actions taken in Germany and Austria-Hungary, not in France and England.⁴⁴

The views of Ritter also were not shared by his fellow German Fritz Fischer.⁴⁵ The title of Fischer's 1961 book establishing his thesis gives a hint as to where he stood: *Griff nach der Weltmacht* (*Grab for World Power*). The English version was rechristened *Germany's Aims in the First World War* and, although that is a serviceably descriptive title, it is much less piquant and provocative. One might surmise that Fischer preferred the German title.⁴⁶

⁴¹ Mona L. Siegel, "Negotiated Truth: The Franco-German Historians Agreement of 1951 and the Long History of Cultural Demobilization After the First World War," in *The Academic World in the Era of the Great War*, ed. Marie-Eve Chagnon and Tomás Irish (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 237-38.

⁴² Luigi Albertini, *The Origins of the War of 1914*, Vol. 1, 2, & 3 (London: Oxford University Press, 1952. Originally published in Italian 1941.)

⁴³ Mombauer, *The Origins of the First World War*, 125.

⁴⁴ Jay Winter, "Historiography 1918-Today," 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. Ute Daniel et al., Freie Universität Berlin, last modified 11 Nov 2014, DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.10498.

⁴⁵ See Annika Mombauer, "Introduction: The Fischer Controversy 50 Years On," *Journal of Contemporary History* 48, no. 2 (2013): 231-40.

⁴⁶ In fact, the title of Fischer's book was meant to be provocative. See Hartmut Pogge von Strandmann, "The Political and Historical Significance of the Fischer Controversy," *Journal of Contemporary History* 48, no. 2 (2013): 253.

The central theme of Fischer's work stood in complete opposition to the ruling orthodoxy of collective responsibility and caused a furor. Fischer "refuted the view that Germany had been innocent in the events that had led to war in 1914, and suggested that at Versailles the Allies had in fact arrived at the correct conclusion about German war guilt."⁴⁷ In his view, it was at the 8 December 1912 'Council of War' that the German leaders took the decision to bring about a war of aggression "the sooner, the better."⁴⁸ This is an incorrect conclusion as no actionable plans came from this meeting, only blustering and a failed information campaign. This will be discussed below in Chapters Three and Four.

Fischer's book and its thesis were received with hostility not only by Gerhard Ritter, but by many of Fischer's fellow German historians, a number of whom had personally experienced the First World War. Members of the German government were outraged and criticized Fischer's thesis. The conventional media acted to fuel the controversy. The weekly *Der Spiegel*, for example, excitedly promoted Fischer's thesis and its emphasis of German guilt.⁴⁹ This type of metaphysical self-immolation is typical of those who feel that persons of the present should admit guilt, accept punishment, and make amends for past actions of others.

As was noted above, Fischer served in the Wehrmacht during the Second World War and had been a member of the Nazi party for three years. Ritter, a nationalist conservative who lamented the advent of the Weimar Republic and the loss of the monarchy, was fervently anti-Nazi.⁵⁰ These life experiences very likely influenced the work of these historians. It must be considered whether Fischer attempted to assuage his personal guilt by lambasting much of

⁴⁷ Mombauer, *The Origins of the First World War*, 120.

⁴⁸ Volker R. Berghahn, "Origins," in *The Cambridge History of the First World War*, Vol. 1, *Global War*, ed. Jay Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 34.

⁴⁹ Strandmann, "The Political and Historical Significance of the Fischer Controversy," 252, and Mombauer, "Introduction: The Fischer Controversy 50 Years On," 231-32.

⁵⁰ Gregory Weeks, "Ritter, Gerhard A." in *The Encyclopedia of Historians and Historical Writing*, ed. Kelly Boyd (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1999), 996-97.

modern German history. Whether Ritter was trying to salvage some sense of German self-worth and international respect by attempting to lessen Germany's role in the causation of the First World War must be reflected upon, as well. This paper takes no stance on these issues but does acknowledge their presence.

In addition to Fischer's primary theme that Germany was responsible for the First World War by instigating a conflict for aggressive, expansionist ends, a focus of Fischer's work was the effect of "domestic policy as the underlying cause for an expansionist and aggressive foreign policy."⁵¹ He also emphasized the concept of the *Sonderweg*, a theory that the German nation followed a unique path from aristocracy to democratization different from any other European nation.⁵²

It is important to understand this concept of the *Sonderweg* to fully understand the historiography of the German Empire. *Sonder* is a German term that is translated to English as 'separate' or 'special' (as in unique). The direct translation of the term *weg* is 'way' but is usually rendered in English as 'path.' Hence *Sonderweg* may be interpreted as a special or unique path. Hence the *Sonderweg* theory is that the German people have progressed and developed in a way that is unique from their neighbors, that they walked a path midway between the materialism and utilitarianism of the Western democratic systems on the one hand, and the autocracy of tsarist Russia on the other.⁵³

This theory was widely accepted across the political spectrum in turn-of-the-century Europe. The divergence between the theory's adherents was whether the unique progression

⁵¹ Mombauer, *The Origins of the First World War*, 120.

⁵² Jürgen von Ungern-Sternberg, "Making Sense of the War (Germany)," 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel et al., Freie Universität Berlin, last modified 8 Oct 2014, DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.10350.

⁵³ Wolfgang J. Mommsen, *Imperial Germany, 1867-1918: Politics, Culture, and Society in an Authoritarian State* (London: Arnold, 1995), 207.

traveled by the German state was a positive or a negative phenomenon. Depending on this, the theory was then particularized with the details corresponding to that person's views. One mainstream interpretation of the *Sonderweg* thesis

stipulated that Germany's geographical position in central Europe, its territorial and political fragmentation rooted in the confessional conflict between Protestant and Catholic, and the presence of aggressively acquisitive powers in the west, north, and south (and the "open frontier" in the east), made war the defining and formative historical experience of the nation.⁵⁴

The positive view of this description is that these circumstances produced a martially strong Germany capable of defending itself even in its geographically central position and a German people fortified with Prussian *Blut und Eisen* (blood and iron). The negative view of this description, one that considered the *Sonderweg* a corrupted path due to Germany's divergence from the liberal west, was employed by Fischer and his followers.⁵⁵ They use the concept of a *Sonderweg* to assemble a linkage of German bellicosity and aggression reaching back into the nineteenth century as it grabbed at the brass ring of world power (*Weltmacht*).⁵⁶ He and his followers believed that the development of German First World War aggressiveness and the later creation of the Nazi state to be a natural evolution of the German state due to its circumstances and the *Sonderweg*.

To a world of historians who mostly felt the issue of First World War guilt had been put to bed, Fischer's book came as quite a shock.

Many of Fischer's central assertions and arguments are not tenable. For example, his emphasis on the primacy of the effect of domestic issues (*Innenpolitik*) on foreign policy

⁵⁴ Kevin Cramer, "A World of Enemies: New Perspectives on German Military Culture and the Origins of the First World War," *Central European History*, 39, no. 2 (Jun 2006): 274.

⁵⁵ Annie Everett, "The Genesis of the Sonderweg," *International Social Science Review* 91, no. 2 (2015): 1-2.

⁵⁶ Fritz Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1967. Originally published in German as *Griff Nach der Weltmacht* in 1961.)

(*Aussenpolitik*) has been widely discredited. As an example, it is no longer thought credible that an alliance of property-owners, industrialists, and government officials reached agreement for support of the naval construction program in return for more protectionist trade policies or that there existed such a negative domestic situation as to prompt the German government to consider a *Flucht nach vorn* (escape into war).⁵⁷

Fischer's use of the historiographical theory of *Sonderweg* has also come into question. Although numerous historians have discredited the theory, others have used it to explain any seeming variation or peculiarity in German development from what they might consider having been the usual modern evolution of a nation-state.⁵⁸

Prior to the First World War, Germans took pride in *Sonderweg*, their unique way of doing things. By the end of the Second World War, however, it had become a term of approbation.⁵⁹

Fischer used the concept in this negative way, ascribing the development of the National Socialist movement to it, as well as using it to make clear Germany's role as the main author of the First World War.⁶⁰ In other words, the Nazis were not an aberration, they were just typical Germans, and the kaiser and his ilk were the natural lead-in to the NSDAP.

One can imagine this did not go down like a nice warm bowl of *Jägerspätzle* for most Germans and many other people, as well.

Gerhard Ritter quickly became Fischer's *bête noire* or, more appropriately for our purposes, his *schwarzes Biest*, leading the campaign against Fischer's ideas. Ritter, who

⁵⁷ Mark Hewitson, *Germany and the Causes of the First World War* (Oxford, UK: Berg, 2004), 3. Also see Gregor Schöllgen, ed., *Escape Into War?: The Foreign Policy of Imperial Germany* (Oxford: Berg, 1990)

⁵⁸ Everett, "The Genesis of the Sonderweg," 1-3.

⁵⁹ Everett, "The Genesis of the Sonderweg," 3-5.

⁶⁰ Everett, "The Genesis of the Sonderweg," 6.

believed the 1951 consortium had settled the question of First World War guilt, accused Fischer of injuring the German national consciousness which had only begun to recover from the trauma of the Second World War.”⁶¹ Ritter believed the Nazi era was a deviation from true German history and saw it “as a *Betriebsunfall* (accident) and Hitler as a one-time aberration.”⁶²

The two main schools of thought, each anchored in the views of either Fischer or Ritter, were at loggerheads for much of the 1960s and 1970s. By the 1980s, Fischer’s view of primary German responsibility had begun to be widely accepted, although the American historian Samuel Williamson, Jr., had tried to refocus debate on the Austro-Hungarians and their level of responsibility.⁶³

Imanuel Geiss was a German historian and a prominent supporter of the Fischer theses. He worked directly with Fritz Fischer. He felt that the strongly negative reaction to Article 231 allowed a false narrative to establish itself among the German populace which suppressed the truth about the origins of the war and caused people to falsely believe in a German lack of guilt. He even, in fact, states that the disbelief of the German population of German guilt for the First World War set the stage for the emergence of the Nazi party.⁶⁴ For Geiss, it was not the crushing weight of the Treaty of Versailles that destroyed the chances for a democratic republic to succeed and which led to the rise of fascism. The culprit was the denial of the German people for responsibility for the war and a resultant lack of remorse.

Volker Berghahn is a German-born historian who has lived in the United States for many years. He supports the basic ideas of Fischer and has been an advocate of the notion of

⁶¹ Strandmann, “The Political and Historical Significance of the Fischer Controversy,” 254.

⁶² Everett, “The Genesis of the Sonderweg,” 8.

⁶³ Samuel R. Williamson, Jr., *Austria-Hungary and the Origins of the First World War* (New York: Macmillan, 1991).

⁶⁴ Mombauer, *The Origins of the First World War*, 110. Also see Imanuel Geiss, “The Outbreak of the First World War and German War Aims,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 1, no. 3 (1966): 75–91.

Innenpolitik, that Germany's pre-war aggression was driven by the need to divert attention from its domestic issues. Berghahn also agrees that the Austrians were duped into a "war of illusions" by the Germans.⁶⁵

Berghahn places stress on the effects of the pre-war arms races as a major factor in the origins of the war and leaves no question of his stance in his chapter in *The Cambridge History of the First World War*:

They (the Germans) adopted Schlieffen's idea of annihilation and added to it the notion of a lightning war...It is against the background of the feeling that a preventive war could be won by the Central Powers that a fatal decision was taken by a few men in Berlin and Vienna that pushed Europe over the brink. *This means that there is no need for scholars to go on a round trip through the capitals of Europe with the aim of finding out that other decision-makers were more responsible for the First World War than the two emperors and their advisers. Berlin and Vienna continue to be the best places for historians to look closely for clues as to why war broke out in 1914.*⁶⁶ (Italics are mine)

In 1991 James Joll released his historical study, *The Origins of the First World War*.⁶⁷ In his book, he elaborated on the important concept of 'unspoken assumptions,' influential presuppositions which guided the actions of those taking monumental decisions prior to the war. It was a theme he had first addressed in a 1968 inaugural lecture delivered at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Some of Joll's identified pre-war assumptions included the concept of social Darwinist belief in the inescapable and necessary elements of warfare, the thought that transnational struggles could ameliorate internal problems, and that the government was gradually being pulled in and under the authority of 'the crowd.'⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Williamson Jr. and May, "An Identity of Opinion," 359. Also see Fritz Fischer, *War of Illusions: German Policies From 1911 to 1914* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1975).

⁶⁶ Berghahn, "Origins," 37.

⁶⁷ James Joll, and Gordon Martel, *The Origins of the First World War*, 3rd ed. (Harlow, UK: Pearson Longman, 2006).

⁶⁸ Williamson Jr. and May, "An Identity of Opinion," 336. Also see Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1896) and Gustave Le Bon, *The Psychology of the Great War* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1916).

This psychological disposition has been called ‘The Mood of 1914’ and Joll felt it led those taking decisions to accept a greater inclination to risk warfare as a solution to problems and to clear the slate for further improvement in society.⁶⁹

The twenty-first century dawned with the Fischer thesis bloodied, having lost a few parts, but still standing.

In 2004, Mark Hewitson sought to further bolster some of the arguments of the Fischerites with his book, *Germany and the Causes of the First World War*. In his introduction, he states plainly that his book is meant to challenge any exculpatory ideas directed at lessening German guilt such as the ‘inadvertence’ theory of Lloyd George, the importance of Joll’s ‘unspoken assumptions,’ the trap of the alliance network, or that the Germans acted in defense.⁷⁰

Another position, though, has risen to prominence, that of the primary responsibility of Russia for the war.

This theory had been floated in earnest in 1970 by L.F.C. Turner in his *The Origins of the First World War*.⁷¹ During these first decades of the twenty-first century, two prominent historians have been strong proponents of this argument.

Sean McMeekin lays out the claim of Russian culpability in his 2011 *The Russian Origins of the First World War*⁷² in which he concludes that Russia incited the war to give it opportunity to gain control of the Bosphorus, the Dardanelles, and the city of Constantinople.⁷³

⁶⁹ Joll and Martel, *The Origins of the First World War*, 291.

⁷⁰ Hewitson, *Germany and the Causes*, 3.

⁷¹ Berghahn, “Origins,” 37, and L.F.C. Turner, *The Origins of the First World War* (London: Edward Arnold, 1970)

⁷² Sean McMeekin, *The Russian Origins of the First World War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

⁷³ Annika Mombauer, “Guilt or Responsibility? The Hundred-Year Debate on the Origins of World War I.” *Central European History* 48, no. 4 (2015): 545.

In 2013, Christopher Clark rocked the historical world with his exceptional and very readable study of the First World War, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914*. In it, he reorients the debate by stressing the need to look beyond the individual persons and states involved (in what he calls prosecutorial narratives) and consider the “multilateral processes of interaction.”⁷⁴ In doing this, Clark dismisses the concept of ‘war guilt.’ He also closely and critically examines the role of Serbia in the years before the war, thereby placing both Austria-Hungary and Germany in a more favorable light.⁷⁵ In addition, Clark emphasizes the collusion of France with Russia and how that collaboration changed the dynamics in central and eastern Europe.⁷⁶

For the sake of brevity, it has been necessary to bypass the work of many accomplished and important scholars. It has also been necessary to refrain from exploring many interesting side pathways, such as whether the Schlieffen Plan actually materially existed,⁷⁷ how the earliest manifestations of modern globalization may have birthed the war,⁷⁸ and whether there existed a ‘cult of the offensive’ in pre-war Germany.⁷⁹ The Schlieffen Plan and the ‘cult of the offensive’ will be discussed in Chapter Four due to their military significance.

The premise of this paper most closely coincides with the arguments elaborated upon in Clark’s *The Sleepwalkers*. As the analysis of this paper is revealed, it will show that the supposition that the German Empire acted in ways meant to incite war (*a la* Fischer, Geiss, and Keegan) is not supported by facts or reason. This paper will also show that attempting to lade

⁷⁴ Christopher M. Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (New York: Harper, 2013), 560.

⁷⁵ Mombauer, “Guilt or Responsibility?,” 547.

⁷⁶ Mombauer, “Guilt or Responsibility?,” 548-49.

⁷⁷ Terence Zuber, *Inventing the Schlieffen Plan: German War Planning, 1871-1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). Also see Terence Zuber, “The Schlieffen Plan Reconsidered,” *War in History* 6, no. 3 (1999): 262–305.

⁷⁸ David M. Rowe, “The Tragedy of Liberalism: How Globalization Caused the First World War,” *Security Studies* 14, no. 3 (2005): 407-447.

⁷⁹ See Stephen Van Evera, “The Cult of the Offensive and the Origins of the First World War,” *International Security* 9, no. 1 (1984): 58–107.

any one country with the totality of blame for an event as immense as the First World War is as nonsensical as carrying coals to the Ruhr Valley.



Chapter Two: Social and Economic Milieu of the German Empire

The focus of this chapter is the core of the domestic environment of the German Empire. It will examine two aspects of the DIMES model, the social and the economic milieus. In the introduction, the DIMES methodology was characterized as an integrative methodology in which each of the components of the model affect each of the others. The social and economic considerations of the German Empire (the S and the E) had great influence on the geopolitical decisions and actions taken by the government (the D and the M). This is the juxtaposition of the concepts of *Innenpolitik* and *Aussenpolitik*. In the following chapter, it will be seen how the information (I) component interacts with all this.

Understanding the social and economic environment in which nations exist is important. Some of the issues considered long-term causes of the war – nationalism, militarism, trade, imperialism/colonialism – are socioeconomic issues. How nations manage these given social and economic conditions is instructive. Responses to internal challenges of this sort can reveal how a nation might respond to external challenges. Domestic circumstances may delimit available responses. They may provoke reactionary policies and decisions. As discussed in the historiography section, a reaction of this type is one feature of the Fischer thesis, that domestic issues occasioned a *Flucht nach vorn* (escape into war) on the part of German leadership that was a leading cause of the First World War.

As social and economic conditions and circumstances in the Second Reich are reviewed, one may note that Germany responded to its challenges, which were quite like the challenges of its neighbors, in ways similar to that of its neighbors. A notable exception, though, especially in respect to Britain and France, was Germany's approach to colonialism. As will be discussed more fully below, this lowered emphasis placed on colonialism, especially in the early years of

the empire, was done to limit potential conflicts with other countries over foreign lands of dubious importance and to avoid the misuse of funds that might be invested more appropriately elsewhere. This approach illustrates how Bismarck signaled that Germany had completed its territorial expansion and wished to live peacefully alongside its neighbors.

Section One – The Social Environment

A custom of the *Neu Jahr* in *fin de siècle* aristocratic Vienna was to pour large drops of molten lead into the icy water of champagne buckets. The various and sundry shapes that formed as the lead droplets cooled were then scrutinized in an attempt to ascertain what fate had in store for the coming year.¹

One wonders what the lead foretold on New Year's Eve 1913.

In an analysis of the geopolitical activities of a state, an understanding of the social atmosphere which existed during the time of that state may seem superfluous but it is in fact quite revealing. Again, it must be noted that the actions of governments do not occur in isolation, quarantined from the society at large. As may be seen so easily in the current era, all influences, even the abstract and incorporeal societal ones, can and do greatly influence governmental activity and decisions. Because of this, in order to understand the geopolitical actions, one must understand the social forces which percolate within and about them.

The years of the latter nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were, in the Western world, a time of great anticipatory excitement for the future. Westerners knew they were living in a different time, a *new* time, a time quite unlike those before it. They could feel a change in the air. In fact, they had already seen and felt the early winds blowing with the introduction of

¹ Max Hastings, *Catastrophe 1914: Europe Goes to War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013), 10.

the telephone, the telegraph, the railroads, and the products of the Second Industrial Revolution. It was an age of world fairs, the most noteworthy of which were expositions held in Paris (1878, 1889, and 1900) and in Chicago (1893). These fairs showcased the modern but, more importantly, they made people look excitedly to the future.

Westerners could sense the upcoming century would not be like those before. In the past, it had been accepted that the future would be about the same as the present, which was not much changed from the past. Now that thinking had been upended. The modern world had been birthed.

But there was a darker side to this time as well. The term *fin de siècle* is often applied specifically to the end of the nineteenth century. Although this term is simply a French phrase meaning ‘end of century,’ it is often associated with a connotation of degeneracy.

The *Fin de Siècle* has proven to be an inflection point in Western Culture. This may be seen most obviously in the art of the period. In the past, music, theater, and the visual arts had elevated and inspired the human psyche with the timeless and traditional aesthetic principles of beauty, heroism, and harmony. Art had represented the ideal. By the latter nineteenth century, though, many artists looked at life as corrupt, dissolute, and unjust. The art they produced embodied these sentiments. It was discordant and dissonant. It was meant to be disturbing and it was meant as a protest against bourgeoisie sensibility, capitalism, colonialism, and traditionalism.

This avant-garde art movement included expressionism, cubism, and the seeds of Dadaism and surrealism. The Viennese Secession was an Austrian avant-garde art movement of which painter Gustav Klimt was a well-known member. Klimt and others rejected mainstream

art to unrestrainedly experiment with unconventional themes such as death, sexuality, and other subjects of moral turpitude.²

Edvard Munch's *The Scream* may be the best-known exemplar of the expressionist movement which was centered in northern Europe but quickly spread worldwide.³ By the time of the war, the even stranger and more decadent art school of Dadaism appeared and was also centered in Germany. Oswald Spengler described the art of the time as “faked painting, full of idiotic, exotic, and showcard effects.”⁴

In Germany, *Der Blaue Reiter* (The Blue Rider) was established, not as a true school of art, but as a coalition of unconventional artists formed in protest of the decisions taken by the governmental Academy of Art as to which pieces should be exhibited publicly. The members of the group, along with true art movements such as *Die Brücke* and the Berlin *Sezession*, tended to produce paintings seen by traditionalists as decadent, disturbing, and corrupt.⁵ They often were all these things and more. But German art of the period was no more disturbing or anti-traditional than other art movements and schools such as the French *les Fauves*, the multinational symbolists, or the American avant-garde. All of Western society was experiencing the early tremors of a continuing cultural upheaval.

Kaiser Wilhelm II was one of many who found the art of the *Fin de Siècle* displeasing and objectionable, warning that “when art descends into the gutter as so often nowadays, choosing to represent misery as even more unlovely than it is already,” then art “sins against the

² Antulio J. Echevarria, “The Times,” In *Imagining Future War: The West's Technological Revolution and Visions of Wars to Come, 1880-1914* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007), 1.

³ Volker R. Berghahn, “Origins,” in *The Cambridge History of the First World War*, Vol. 1, *Global War*, ed. Jay Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 24.

⁴ Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Vol. 1, *Form and Actuality*, trans. Charles Francis Atkinson (London: Arktos, 2021, Originally published 1918), 390.

⁵ Holger H. Herwig, *Hammer or Anvil?: Modern Germany 1648-Present* (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Co., 1994), 186.

German people.” He felt the same of the theatre, explaining that it “should contribute to culture of the soul, elevate morals and ‘inculcate respect for the highest traditions of our German Fatherland.’”⁶

The societal disharmony and fragmentation felt at this time may also be appreciated in the theories of Nietzschean philosophy which give license to our basest human drives and, by doing so, abase us and all of society. And it was pervasive. The German literary establishment “featured an almost uncritical acceptance of vulgarized versions of Friedrich Nietzsche’s thoughts.”⁷ The social gloom and corruption may also be noted in other literature of the time; witness Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and the dystopian despair of Kafka’s works. It may be seen in the unconventional and often odd psychological theories of Sigmund Freud. And, possibly most importantly of all, the degeneracy of the age may be noted in the eugenics of Francis Galton and the Social Darwinism of Ernst Haeckel.

The dark thinking furthered the acceptance of dark political theories such as communism, fascism, extreme nationalism, and the geopolitical considerations of colonialism and *Lebensraum*. It must be acknowledged that nineteenth-century Germany

became the center from which the ideas destined to govern the world in the twentieth century spread east and west. Whether it was Hegel or Marx, List or Schmoller, Sombart or Mannheim, whether it was socialism in its more radical form or merely ‘organization’ or ‘planning’ of a less radical kind...it was in Germany that they were perfected and during the last quarter of the nineteenth and the first quarter of the twentieth century they reached their fullest development.⁸

⁶ Wilhelm II, quoted in Barbara Tuchman, *The Proud Tower* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1966), 305.

⁷ Herwig, *Hammer or Anvil?*, 187.

⁸ Friedrich August von Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007, Originally published 1944), 74.

These were anti-Western ideas. They were authoritarian and gave nascence to totalitarian thought and practice. They were ideas that led to a diminution of the individual and his concerns.

As will be discussed further in Chapter Three, the military was also affected by this degenerate thinking. Along with a general decline in society, the concept of *Vernichtungskrieg* (annihilation warfare) was becoming accepted as a conventional method of warfare.⁹

All of this gave credence to the concept that there exists an inescapable obligatory decline and degeneration in civilization. The German historian and theorist Oswald Spengler expounded upon this thinking in his prescient two-volume magnum opus *Decline of the West* which describes the degeneration of true organic culture into the artificial mire of civilization.¹⁰ The soul and folk of the culture are sucked into the mass of the city which has an “uncomprehending hostility to all the traditions representative of the Culture (nobility, church...conventions in art).”¹¹ To Spengler, the culture had *become*, it had reached its fullness and so began to transform into the emptiness of civilization and so it began to die.¹² This is a remarkably close to Giambattista Vico’s representation of the culture that begins to die when it reaches the fullness of its beauty.¹³ Dying cultures fertilize corruption and death and war. In 1896 the French psychologist Gustave Le Bon published his pioneering study *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*. In it he expresses great concern about “the destruction of those religious, political, and

⁹ *Vernichtungskrieg* (annihilation warfare), first expounded upon and defined by Clausewitz in his *Vom Kriege*, is not what a cursory look at the term would make it seem to be. See chapter four for explanatory commentary.

¹⁰ Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Vol. 1, *Form and Actuality*, 141-43.

¹¹ Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Vol. 2, *Perspectives of World-History*, trans. Charles Francis Atkinson (London: Arktos, 2021, Originally published 1922), 44.

¹² Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Vol. 2, *Perspectives of World-History*, 71.

¹³ Ernst Breisach, *Historiography – Ancient, Medieval, and Modern* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 213. Also see Giambattista Vico, *The New Science*, trans. David Marsh (London: Penguin Books, 2001, Originally published 1725.)

social beliefs in which all the elements of our civilisation are rooted.”¹⁴ Le Bon argued that the modern West was in the midst of transformational change that was similar to that of the Roman Empire at the time of its fall.¹⁵

For some commentators, though, the possibility of war and cataclysmic upheaval was not to be feared because from it great improvement could appear. For the Marxist socialist, this might be a social revolution in which antiquated values, politics, and traditions could be done away with.¹⁶ For the German militarist, warfare itself came to be looked at as a cleansing process.

The German philosopher Immanuel Kant, writing in the latter seventeenth century, had consistently promoted peace and decried war, but he also acknowledged the burnishing effects war had on society and on the advancement of culture¹⁷ because it “ennobles the character of the nation.” And Kant felt that “a prolonged peace usually results in the reign of commercialism and therewith ignoble self-seeking, cowardice, effeminacy, and thus degrades the national character.”¹⁸

In a Dec 1880 letter, Helmut Moltke (the Elder) remarked to the Swiss legal expert Johann Kaspar Bluntschli that “Eternal peace is a dream... War is part of God’s world-order. Within it unfold the noblest virtues of men... Without war the world would sink into a swamp of materialism.”¹⁹

¹⁴ Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1896), xiv.

¹⁵ Echevarria, “The Times,” 9.

¹⁶ Berghahn, “Origins,” 24.

¹⁷ A. J. Rahilly, “The Influence of German Philosophy,” *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 4, no. 16 (1915): 565–66.

¹⁸ Immanuel Kant as quoted in Rahilly, “The Influence of German Philosophy,” 566.

¹⁹ The World War I Document Archive, “On the Nature of War by Helmut Moltke (the Elder),” Pre-1914 Documents, last modified 29 May 2009, [https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/On_the_Nature_of_War_by_Helmut_Moltke_\(the_Elder\)](https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/On_the_Nature_of_War_by_Helmut_Moltke_(the_Elder)) and Theodore S. Hamerow, ed., *The Age of Bismarck: Documents and Interpretations* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973, 320.

During the latter decades of the nineteenth century, the writings of German historian and political thinker Heinrich von Treitschke crystalized this type of thought. A professor at the University of Berlin, Treitschke used his podium more like a pulpit, preaching the near-religion of nationalism.²⁰ Nationalism, to Treitschke, was a beneficial thing, having emerged so as to protect the people against threats from the outside and because “cultures, morality and law could only develop within well-ordered states.”²¹ Echoing Moltke, he felt that “the idea of perpetual peace is an illusion supported only by those of weak character.”²² In the first volume of *Politics*, Treitschke explained how war drew the nation together because “the individual must only remember that he is a part of the whole...the grandeur of war lies in the utter annihilation of puny man in the great conception of the State.” War is beneficial because “war is the one remedy for an ailing nation (and) in war the chaff is winnowed from the wheat.”²³

General Friedrich von Bernhardi furthered this thinking about the salutary effects of war in his best-selling 1912 work, *Deutschland und der nächste Krieg (Germany and the Next War)*. Bernhardi’s book was not so much a reflection of actual German society as it was a call to arms to a German people whose martial spirit he felt was lacking.²⁴ He proclaimed war as a natural right, as a duty, and as a biological necessity of the first importance, a regulative element in the

²⁰ “Heinrich von Treitschke and Prussian Historiography,” in *Documents of German History*, edited by Louis L. Snyder (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1958), 259.

²¹ Mark Hewitson, *Germany and the Causes of the First World War* (Oxford, UK: Berg, 2004), 97-98.

²² Sarah Watts, “Extracts from *German History in the Nineteenth Century and Political Writings*-Heinrich von Treitschke,” Internet Modern History Sourcebook- Fordham University, 6 October 2023, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/19vontreitschke.asp>

²³ Heinrich von. Treitschke, *Politics*, Vol. 1, trans. Blanche Dugdale and Torben De Bille (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1916, Originally published in Germany in 1897), 66-67.

²⁴ Christian K. Melby, “Militarism,” 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. Ute Daniel et al., Freie Universität Berlin, last modified 17 Nov 2020, DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.11495, and Hewitson, *Germany and the Causes*, 94.

life of mankind which cannot be dispensed with because, without it, an unhealthy development will follow which excludes every advancement of the race, and therefore all real civilization.²⁵

In the years before the First World War, especially those years prior to the turn of the century, the German army was widely considered to be a bedrock organization of the nation. It was acknowledged as the instrument that had unified the German people. Therefore, great respect was given to it and to the Prussian ideology which molded it. The matchless victories in the *Einigungskriege* (the Wars of Unification) and the Franco-Prussian War brought much admiration to the army, especially among the all-important middle-class. One must remember that this was only a couple of decades after the volatile and explosive mid-century revolutionary period and the Socialist/Communist movement was still quite a potent force. The liberal bourgeoisie (then as now) had found the German military an offensive organization. However, the success of the army in the unification of the German state had made many middle-class liberals acknowledge its value.²⁶

War was viewed by many Germans as a productive force, as the anvil upon which the German nation would be hammered together. Some felt that “the catalytic energies released by total war could be instrumentalized to recast the German nation.”²⁷

In his book, Bernhardi also proclaimed that “Might is at once the supreme right, and the dispute as to what is right is decided by the arbitrament of war. War gives a biologically just decision since its decisions rest on the very nature of things.”²⁸

²⁵ Friedrich von. Bernhardi, *Germany and the Next War*, trans. Allen H. Powles (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1914. Originally published in Germany in 1912 as *Deutschland und der nächste Krieg*), 18.

²⁶ Hewitson, *Germany and the Causes*, 86.

²⁷ Kevin Cramer, “A World of Enemies: New Perspectives on German Military Culture and the Origins of the First World War,” *Central European History*, 39, no. 2 (Jun 2006): 297.

²⁸ Bernhardi, *Germany and the Next War*, 23.

Bernhardi's book caused something of a firestorm across Europe, a reaction at which he expressed surprise, as he was merely writing about ideas that were commonly felt in Germany, nurtured by the overwhelming and definitive victories in the Wars of Unification.²⁹ His book had a Nietzschean quality about it. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche had stated that "‘Exploitation’ does not belong to a depraved, or imperfect and primitive society: it belongs to the ... living being as a primary organic function; it is a consequence of the intrinsic Will to Power, which is precisely the Will to Life."³⁰

Nietzsche did not invent the 'might is right' theme, though. His "aberrant genius... merely reinforced a current" already in existence, already established in German thought.³¹

A sense of German nationalism came to be closely aligned with these themes of will and might. Treitschke had opined that "The most important possession of a state...is power" and "it is the highest moral duty of the state to increase its power."³²

Nationalism, though, is in no way inherently immoral or dangerous. In its basic form, it simply means that a person's loyalty is directed toward the nation state and its land as opposed to being directed toward a sovereign ruler. The creation of nations would not be possible without nationalism. Nationalism only becomes problematic if it is manifested in excessive militarism that attempts to unjustly extend hegemony over other nations and peoples. This militarism

²⁹ Gustave Le Bon, *The Psychology of the Great War* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1916), 61, and Jack Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive: Military Decision Making and the Disasters of 1914* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 127.

³⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Helen Zimmern (New York: The Modern Library, 1917, Originally published 1886), 200.

³¹ Rahilly, "The Influence of German Philosophy," 568. Also see John H. Muirhead, *German Philosophy in Relation to the War* (London: J. Murray, 1915). Muirhead is of the opinion that the pre-war German philosophical is actually apostatic to traditional German thought. But see Günter Roth, "Field Marshal von Moltke the Elder His Importance Then and Now," *Army History*, no. 23 (1992): 4-5, where he states that "in Clausewitz's description of the nature of absolute war, a decisive role is played by the insight that power is the driving force and that the religious community is replaced by the nation as the highest, most essential form of the moral ideal."

³² Watts, "Extracts."

“viewed war as a natural element in the conflicts between nations and was at pains to encourage aggressive tendencies and the upholding of militarist values amongst the population.”³³

Wilhelmine Germans were less disposed to outwardly express nationalist attitudes than Germans earlier in the Second Reich and they were certainly no more inclined to voice these expressions than other European countries. In fact, “national affairs, which comprised matters of state, military security and foreign policy, had enjoyed an unusual degree of exemption from political scrutiny and debate.” In other words, these issues were not discussed much publicly. That changed in the new century. This new public airing of matters military and nationalistic, matters that previously were kept under wraps, gave the impression that Germany was experiencing a sudden upswing in nationalistic fervor when actually it was only experiencing a more public discussion than had been the practice before.³⁴

In fact, it must be said that the majority of Germans, including many on the right, “did not hold radical nationalist views and did not harbour dreams of aggressive expansionism abroad.”³⁵

Bernhard von Bülow made two famous speeches to the Reichstag while he was the imperial foreign minister which focused on a somewhat restrained, but still dynamic, form of nationalism. In the first, the so-called ‘Place in the Sun’ speech given on 6 December 1897, he stated, in a less-than-veiled manner, that “we believe it is inadvisable...to exclude Germany from competition with other nations in lands with a rich and promising future.” In other words, do not attempt to exclude Germany from the quest for colonies. He then softened the edge of that

³³ Wolfgang J. Mommsen, “The Topos of Inevitable War in Germany in the Decade Before 1914,” in *Germany in the Age of Total War*, ed. Volker Berghahn and Martin Kitchen (London: Croom Helm, 1981), 27.

³⁴ Hewitson, *Germany and the Causes*, 42.

³⁵ Hewitson, *Germany and the Causes*, 45.

statement a bit: “We do not want to put anyone in our shadow, but we also demand our place in the sun.”³⁶

This blueprint of an expansionist, colonialist Germany provided the ideology and impetus for the expansion of German naval power, which was soon launched, along with the concurrent and all-important policy of *Weltpolitik*. *Weltpolitik* and its pivotal role in Imperial German geopolitics will be discussed below in Chapter Four.

In another address to the Reichstag on 11 Dec 1899, Bülow delivered what is commonly called ‘The Hammer and Anvil Speech.’ In it, he laid out his vision of a strong and assertive, but fair-minded, German nation. Excerpts include:

We don’t want to step on the toes of any foreign power, but at the same time we don’t want our own feet tramped by any foreign power and we don’t intend to be shoved aside by any foreign power, not in political nor in economic terms... To stand dreamily to one side while other people split up the pie, we cannot and we will not do... If the English speak of a ‘Greater Britain;’ if the French speak of a ‘Nouvelle France;’ ... then we, too, have the right to a greater Germany. We’ll only be able to keep ourselves at the fore if we realize that there is no welfare for us without power, without a strong army and a strong fleet. In the coming century the German people will be a hammer or an anvil.³⁷

Interestingly, Germany became, at various times, both the hammer and the anvil.³⁸

A zeal for nationalism was widespread in the middle and upper classes of the German empire. Because a unified Germany was a relatively recent development, Germans “tended to

³⁶ German History in Documents and Images, “Bernhard von Bülow on Germany’s ‘Place in the Sun’ (1897),” Wilhelmine Germany and the First World War (1890-1918), https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=783

³⁷ The World War I Document Archive, “Bernhard von Bülow: Hammer and Anvil Speech before the Reichstag, December 11, 1899,” 1914 Documents, last modified 29 June 2009, https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/In_English_translation

³⁸ The phrase ‘hammer and anvil’ was coined by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in his satiric play *Der Gross-Coptha: You must either conquer and rule or lose and serve, suffer or triumph, and be the anvil or the hammer*. See Herwig, *Hammer or Anvil?*, viii.

dote on it with all the exaggerated fondness of middle-aged parents suddenly blessed with an offspring. Most of them respected, admired, and even idolized the empire.”³⁹

Warfare, widely considered to be manly and heroic, was seen as a regenerative remedy for the moral degeneracy of society and as a method to unify *das Volk*.⁴⁰ The victory of the Franco-Prussian War was to Germans not only a geopolitical victory, but a “triumph of Teutonic virility over Gallic effeminacy.”⁴¹

The younger Moltke reflected some of this type of thought in a collection of his writings published by his wife after his death. He wrote in November 1914 that “*Eine geistige Weiterentwicklung der Menschheit ist nur durch Deutschland möglich.*” (“Further spiritual development of mankind is only possible through Germany.”)⁴²

Whether or not the Second Reich developed an overly aggressive nationalism that was distinctively different than that of other European countries is at the center of the debate over the issues preceding the First World War. This will be addressed in the subsequent sections of this paper, but at this juncture it is important to note that a uniquely German national political philosophy has been described that heavily influenced the decision-making processes of the German Empire.⁴³ Whether or not this description is accurate or of any real consequence is another matter for debate. What is important here is that these ideas greatly influenced the German sense of self and the concept of warfare in the German Empire post-unification. This

³⁹ Hamerow, ed., *The Age of Bismarck*, 303.

⁴⁰ Ian Kershaw, *To Hell and Back: Europe 1914-1949* (New York: Penguin Books, 2015), 40.

⁴¹ Cramer, “A World of Enemies,” 282.

⁴² Helmut von Moltke, “Betrachtungen und Erinnerungen” in *Erinnerungen, Briefe, Dokumente 1877-1916* (Stuttgart: Der Kommende Tag A.-G. Verlag, 1922), 14.

⁴³ Roth, “Field Marshal von Moltke the Elder,” 4-5.

immanent characteristic has been termed *Gesinnungsmilitarismus* (attitude of militarism) and it was an acclimatization of military sentiments throughout the German culture.⁴⁴

After the poor performance of the German armies against those of Napoleon in the early nineteenth century, and the ruminations of Hegel concerning them, Carl von Clausewitz was inspired to write his masterwork, *Vom Kriege* (*On War*, lit. ‘*From Wars*’). Further discussion will ensue in chapter four, but it is in Clausewitz’s text where the concept of absolute war, which was to become a prime tenet of the German military, was first broached.

As will be noted below, this concept of absolute or total war came to be associated with another issue that began to plague German culture and all of the West at this time – Social Darwinism. The malign influence of Social Darwinism arose from the application of Darwin’s biological theories to the interaction of humans and nations.⁴⁵ These interactions were imbued with the Darwinian sense of the ‘survival of the fittest’⁴⁶ in which the strongest were justified in subjugating the weak, whether it be another person or another nation.⁴⁷ This produces a rationale reminiscent of the cartoon that shows a small fish being eaten by a bigger fish which is being eaten by a larger fish still. It was widely agreed, especially by the General Staff, that “if Germany failed to expand her power, she would eventually be consumed by a stronger power.”⁴⁸ It was felt imperative to be the largest, fittest fish.

⁴⁴ Oliver Stein, “Pre-war Military Planning (Germany),” 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel et al., Freie Universität Berlin, last modified 3 Mar 2021, DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.11515.

⁴⁵ Kathi Badertscher, “Social Darwinism,” 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. Ute Daniel et al., Freie Universität Berlin, last modified 17 Nov 2020, DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.11484.

⁴⁶ It should be noted that Darwin did not originate this phrase. See Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Biology* (London: Williams, 1864), 444-45.

⁴⁷ Volker R. Berghahn, *Europe in the Era of Two World Wars: From Militarism and Genocide to Civil Society, 1900-1950* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2006), 16, 20.

⁴⁸ Robert T. Foley, “From Volkskrieg to Vernichtungskrieg: German Concepts of Warfare, 1871–1935,” in *War, Peace and World Orders in European History*, ed. Anja V. Hartmann and Beatrice Heuser (The New International Relations Series. London: Routledge, 2001), 221.

The interplay of two entities in a competition to determine which is the ‘fittest’ necessitates that those two entities consider each other a constant danger, that they consider each other the enemy, and it necessitates that, in order that one may survive as the ‘fittest,’ the other must be annihilated. This quickly poisons the well of international rapport and trust and it causes one people to see nothing but the worst in the other. *Fin de siècle* France saw Germany as bellicose, autocratic, and “hostile to individual liberty.” Germany perceived France as decadent and degenerate with a “predilection for revolution and anarchy.”⁴⁹

The Social Darwinist manner of thinking also soon led to eugenics⁵⁰ and, in combination with nationalism, to ethnonationalism. Ethnonationalism may progress into attempts at racial extermination or extreme brutality directed at certain racial groups. Some of this was seen in the suppression of the Herero uprising in German South West Africa in the first decade of the twentieth century.⁵¹ It was more unreservedly and demonstrably to be noted in the cruel subjugation of the Congolese by the Belgians. One of the consequences of ethnopolitical conflict is the blurring of the lines between soldier and civilian and this is said to then further the acceptance of the concept of *Vernichtungskrieg* (annihilation warfare).⁵² This paper will address this subject more extensively below in the section concerning military activities and discern the true nature and definition of *Vernichtungskrieg* at that point.

⁴⁹ Cramer, “A World of Enemies.” 281-82.

⁵⁰ Badertscher finds this linkage “problematic.”

⁵¹ Berghahn, *Europe in the Era of Two World Wars*, 21-22.

⁵² Berghahn, *Europe in the Era of Two World Wars*, 25. Many countries have committed similar offenses with comparable results. Even in our supposedly enlightened day and age, the offense still occurs. Note the 7 October 2023 attack of the Hamas terrorist group on Israeli civilians. Also see Isabel V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), and Jonas Kreienbaum, “Colonial Policy, Colonial Conflicts and War before 1914,” 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. Ute Daniel et al., Freie Universität Berlin, last modified 14 Feb 2022, DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.11556.

The German government found nationalism useful for pursuing goals of growing the military, promoting an interventionist and expansionist foreign policy, and suppressing socialism.⁵³ As an aid to the government in working to achieve these objectives, numerous nationalistic groups were formed. These groups, commonly bankrolled by landholders and industrialists, included the Pan-German League (*der Alldeutsche Verband*), the Navy League (*der Deutscher Seeverein*) and the Army League (the German Defense League or *der Deutscher Wehrverein*).⁵⁴ The Pan-German League, for example, “called for the uncompromising unification of all Germans into an ethnically and politically homogeneous German Empire... (using) language as a cultural marker for ethnic belonging” and wished to expand the German Empire to encompass these German peoples.⁵⁵

The Army League, founded in 1912, forcefully lobbied for a great increase in the size of the army and increased funding to accomplish that goal. In doing so, “it positioned itself in direct opposition to the Prussian War Ministry and the Reich's government and stood for a war-affirming Social Darwinist view of the world.”⁵⁶

The Navy League, founded by the government in secret,⁵⁷ was a vital ally of the naval brass through its work at championing increased governmental outlay for the *Kaiserliche Marine* and in trying to create an almost cultish aura around the navy. To gain the support of the masses,

⁵³ Berghahn, “Origins,” 19.

⁵⁴ Kershaw, *To Hell and Back*, 16.

⁵⁵ Björn Hofmeister, “Pan-German League,” 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. Ute Daniel et al., Freie Universität Berlin, last modified 26 Oct 2016, DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.10991. Also see German History in Documents and Images, “Statutes of the Pan-German League [*Alldeutscher Verband*] (1903),” Wilhelmine Germany and the First World War (1890-1918), https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=774 and “The Pan-German League, 1891,” in *Documents of German History*, ed. Louis L. Snyder (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1958), 270-73, which relates the constitution and policies of the League.

⁵⁶ Stein, “Pre-war Military Planning (Germany).” The seemingly counterintuitive opposition of the Prussian War Ministry as to increasing the size of the army will be discussed in Chapter Four below.

⁵⁷ Hull, *Absolute Destruction*, 105.

a type of theater or performance art was centered around the naval arms race which included showy fleet reviews and the public launching of new ships. These exhibitions were heavily covered in the media and meant to instill and intensify enthusiasm⁵⁸ and respect for the navy and more general feelings of patriotism.⁵⁹ These activities exploited techniques explored by Gustave Le Bon in his book *The Crowd* which was alluded to earlier in this paper and will be touched on again further down.

The military-nationalistic qualities of these groups allowed them the cover to criticize the government when they felt the government was being weak or inept. The nationalist groups had developed an aura that allowed them to shape geopolitical policy and therefore they wielded great power. In this way, they began to influence public opinion to such a degree that, when the government needed to take a foreign policy decision, it had to seriously consider the ideas and demands of the agitation groups.⁶⁰

In the pre-war era, those who aligned with the nationalistic groups took their “Pan-Germanism with Teutonic seriousness and *Gründlichkeit* (thoroughness).”⁶¹ As such, they continually acted to hold the government accountable for actions they feared threatened the international standing of the German state.

There were also those who advocated against a nationalistic stance as they felt it was detrimental to the long-term progress and economic health of the nation. In 1884 in *The Man*

⁵⁸ The term *enthusiasm* is most appropriate here. The etymology of this term shows that it is derived from the Ancient Greek term ἐνθουσιασμός (enthousiasmós) which means an inspired frenzy or possession by a greater spirit. The spirit at this time, the prevailing *Zeitgeist*, was the allure of German naval power. See Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1901), 920. Also see Douglas Harper, “Etymology of Enthusiasm,” Online Etymology Dictionary, last modified 13 Oct 2021, accessed 14 January 2024, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/enthusiasm>.

⁵⁹ Dirk Bönker, “Naval Race between Germany and Great Britain, 1898-1912,” 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. Ute Daniel et al., Freie Universität Berlin, last modified 11 Jan 2015, DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.10536.

⁶⁰ Hull, *Absolute Destruction*, 105-06.

⁶¹ Rahilly, “The Influence of German Philosophy,” 569.

Versus the State, Herbert Spencer explains that the mindset of militarism is not compatible with the mindset of industrialization.⁶²

Three decades later, in 1913, Norman Angell expanded this economic argument in *The Great Illusion*. Angell states that “it is assumed...that a nation’s relative prosperity is broadly determined by its political power,” but he “challenges this whole doctrine.”⁶³ He goes on to explain that the interdependency of modern European nations means that any disruption of it will result in serious consequences for all involved, including the instigator of the conflict. Therefore, this will act as a check on future military conflict.⁶⁴ Some proof of the moderating effect of business on international interactions lies in the relationship between Germany and Russia where “estrangement between Russia and Germany began with the soldiers...it never extended to the bankers.”⁶⁵ Spengler tells us that, in the case of a war, “It was the opinion of the expert, almost everywhere, that the economic consequences of general mobilization would compel the breaking up of hostilities within a few weeks.”⁶⁶ And it is Gustave Le Bon’s belief that “because conquest would have impoverished the vanquished,” war to obtain markets for a country’s goods would be foolish.⁶⁷

Many German businessmen concurred with these notions. The professor of economics Karl Hefferich, who was also a director of Deutsche Bank and had managed the financing for the Baghdad Railway, believed that joint business ventures with other nations were a counterbalance to international tension and mistrust and thus acted to placate concerns over Germany’s growing financial and military influence. Reich industrial magnates such as the owners and directors of

⁶² Herbert Spencer, *The Man Versus the State* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1884), 109-10.

⁶³ Norman Angell, *The Great Illusion* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1913), ix-x.

⁶⁴ Angell, *The Great Illusion*, x-xi, Berghahn, *Europe in the Era of Two World Wars*, 26-27, and John Keegan, *The First World War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 10-12.

⁶⁵ Alfred Vagts, *The Military Attachè* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1967), 243.

⁶⁶ Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Vol. 1, *Form and Actuality*, 601.

⁶⁷ Le Bon, *The Psychology of the Great War*, 136.

companies such as Thyssen, Siemens, and Krupp were vocal about geopolitical strife being bad for business and promoted international commercial projects as a preventative for conflict. They also tended to prefer foreign relations efforts to be directed at maintaining open markets as opposed to acquiring new colonies.⁶⁸

The aforementioned Baghdad Railway is an interesting case study into multinational cooperation and how it enables those involved to work out issues that have the potential to develop into an international crisis.

By way of considerable German involvement in engineering, construction, and finance, the building of the Baghdad Railway connecting Constantinople with Baghdad and then onward to the Persian Gulf was begun in 1903. Berlin already had a direct rail line to Constantinople. The extension of a direct route all the way from Berlin to Baghdad and the Gulf unsettled the foreign offices of both Russia and Britain.⁶⁹ Russia had set its sights on control of areas of Persia and of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles. Britain was concerned that such a railway might threaten its interests in India and the nearby area.

German banks had been active in the Ottoman Empire since the latter 1880s. By the beginning of the new century, the Germans had thoroughly ensconced themselves in Ottoman finances by backing several ventures including other rail projects. Consequently, portions of Turkey were considered subjects of unofficial German financial imperialism. For this reason, the nationalist British press and its readership demanded that no British money be allowed to help finance an imperialist German project.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Hewitson, *Germany and the Causes*, 31-35.

⁶⁹ Jan Palmowski, "Berlin–Baghdad Railway," *A Dictionary of Contemporary World History*, Oxford University Press, 2008, accessed 26 Nov 2023, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199295678.001.0001/acref-9780199295678-e-233>.

⁷⁰ Boris Barth, "Imperialism," 1914-1918-online. *International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, ed. Ute Daniel et al., Freie Universität Berlin, last modified 4 Mar 2015, DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.10567.

Accordingly, Britain and France attempted to squelch the building of the Baghdad Railway by attempting to deny needed additional capital.⁷¹ This was only successful in delaying things. As matters progressed, French investors and banks provided more than one-third of the required capital even as the French government was expressing its explicit opposition to the entire project. Private banks and individuals did not necessarily feel the need to toe the governmental line in situations which were not critical to the national interest if a profit were to be made. And, while building the line, the Germans embarked on a diplomatic campaign to convince both the Russians and the British to drop their opposition. Russia acquiesced in 1911. The British came on board in 1914 with an agreement by which they would be allowed to build and control the last portion of the railway to the Persian Gulf.⁷² This compromise allowed all to profit and is an example where conflicting national differences could be solved with persistence and understanding. The successful negotiations over the Baghdad Railway demonstrated that “German diplomacy in the years before World War I could be low-key, tactful, and successful.”⁷³

However, not all agreed with these commentators concerning the supposed salutary effects of intertwined economics. U.S. admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan, author of the extraordinarily influential book, *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660–1783*, made exactly the opposite argument in a March 1912 article titled, like Angell’s book, “The Great Illusion.” He felt that modern industrialization made conflict *more* likely as nations quarreled over territory and overseas outlets for their products. Mahan states in his concluding paragraph

⁷¹ Frank McDonough, *The Origins of the First and Second World Wars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 9.

⁷² Barth, “Imperialism.”

⁷³ Palmowski, “Berlin–Baghdad Railway.”

that “the entire conception of the work [Angell’s *Great Illusion*] is itself an illusion based upon a profound misreading of human action.”⁷⁴

The German lieutenant colonel Baron Ottomar von der Osten-Sacken-Rhein agreed. In a 1905 study published as *Deutschlands nächster Krieg* (*Germany’s Next War*), Osten-Sacken-Rhein was concerned because conflicts “between the states were manifested especially in the economic sphere and were ready to flow on the battlefield.” He reasoned that because Germany had developed such a robust industrial economy, it was constrained in its options and compelled to conduct a more active, aggressive foreign policy and acquire a large naval force. He wrote: “How can we engage in the world trade, if we are not in a position to protect it?” All these developing circumstances were placing Germany at a greater risk of war.⁷⁵

Modern industrialization may or may not have made war more likely, but the Polish rail pioneer and banker Jan Gotlib Bloch was certain that it would have another effect. He was convinced that industrialization would transform war into that which would be destructive beyond anyone’s imagination. Bloch was a pacifist and student of modern warfare. His 1899 book, *The Future of War: In Its Technical, Economic, and Political Relation*, sought to prove scientifically that modern state-of-the-art warfare “would not bring economic or political advantage to the opponents and that war was a pointless and ineffective means of conflict resolution.”⁷⁶

⁷⁴ A.T. Mahan, “The Great Illusion,” *The North American Review* 195, no. 676 (March 1912): 332. Also see John H. Maurer, “Classic Works on Sea Power Have Enduring Value,” *Proceedings of the U.S. Naval Institute* 147 no. 6 (June 2021) <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2021/june/classic-works-sea-power-have-enduring-value>

⁷⁵ Roberto Sciarone, “Germany’s Next War: Assumptions and Military Strategies of the German Army in 1905,” in *Empires and Nations from the Eighteenth to the Twentieth Century: Volume 2*, ed. by Antonello Biagini and Giovanna Motta (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 279-280.

⁷⁶ Agnieszka Janiak-Jasińska, “Bloch, Jan Gotlib,” 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. Ute Daniel et al. Freie, Universität Berlin, last modified 8 Oct 2014, DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.10101. Also see Eric Brose, “Arms Race prior to 1914, Armament Policy,” 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of

For Bloch, war would become obsolete as soon as nations realized the impracticality of modern warfare, with its immense power of destruction, for solving political differences. Bloch questioned “whether the extermination of millions of men will not be wholly without result.”⁷⁷ In addition, Bloch was of the opinion that modern Western culture had developed to the point that “the thought of those convulsions which will be called forth by a war, and of the terrible means prepared for it, will hinder military enterprise.”⁷⁸ And indeed, the developed countries of the West were not only integrated economically. They were also closely linked through religion, art, intellectual pursuits such as science and literature, and by way of many international agreements that regulated maritime activity, postal services, telegraphy, railways, and other things.⁷⁹ All of the countries of the West, from those of Europe proper to the European colonies, past and present, from the Americas to the Antipodes, considered themselves part of a Pan-Western culture. This culture was based on Greco-Roman philosophy, Judeo-Christian values and ethics, and was economically capitalist.

And so, there were people who felt that war was inevitable and probably salutary and there were those who felt that the world was progressing into a state in which war was increasingly improbable. The common citizen in Germany and all of Europe had no real interest in engaging in aggressive war but would, in the event of war, certainly fight to defend his country.

One group, those who were of a socialist bent, especially the working class, is of particular interest as to its willingness to fight a war. It was not known where those persons

the First World War, ed. Ute Daniel et al., Freie Universität Berlin, last modified 8 Oct 2014, DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.10219.

⁷⁷ Jan Bloch, *The Future of War: In Its Technical, Economic, and Political Relations* (Boston: Ginn & Co., 1899), lxviii.

⁷⁸ Bloch, *The Future of War*, lxxi. Bloch credits the modern man with far more restraint and wisdom than is deserved.

⁷⁹ Keegan, *The First World War*, 12-13.

would fall in the event of an international conflict. Socialist leaders, such as the prominent historian of the French Revolution and French socialist leader, Jean Jaurès, were hopeful that the working classes would feel a binding solidarity towards their counterparts in other countries, making war impossible.⁸⁰ When this concept was actually tested in the Great War, though, members of the working classes supported their respective nations, not an international class of socialist worker in opposition to the war, and willingly fought alongside their fellow citizens.⁸¹

For the socialist common man, his support for the German cause in the First World War almost certainly did come from a sense of nationalistic pride. But for the German socialist leader, there was an ulterior motive for his support. There was a strong current in Socialism's pedigree which included the towering figures of the Germans Marx and Engels. Later, Werner Sombart, Johann Plenge, and Paul Lensch crystalized the German Socialist/Marxist position: that the German state was the world-historically anointed representative for the development of a new type of twentieth-century state and a higher order of economy in which all of life was to be planned and organized. These socialist leaders held that it was vital for Germany to survive in order to inaugurate this soon-to-be bastion of 'organized freedom.'⁸² All that remained at that point was to marry this ideology with the concept of power politics to produce the leftist ideal of national socialism. This would happen soon enough.

⁸⁰ This reminds one of the oft-quoted, but poorly cited, left-wing axiom "What if they gave a war and nobody came?" This adage is probably a recontextualization of a line from the book length Carl Sandburg poem *The People, Yes*: "Sometime they'll give a war and nobody will come." See Carl Sandburg, *The People, Yes* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1936), 43. Also see Elisa Marcobelli, "Pre-war Socialist Pacifism," 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. Ute Daniel et al., Freie Universität Berlin, last modified 6 Nov 2018, DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.10526/1.1. Marcobelli describes how, at the 1907 Seventh Congress of the Second International in Stuttgart, plans were made by Jaurès and other socialist leaders "to exploit war to bring about the social revolution."

⁸¹ Michael S. Neiberg, "Introduction," in *The World War I Reader: Primary and Secondary Sources*, ed. Michael S. Neiberg (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 5, and Hastings, *Catastrophe 1914*, 67.

⁸² Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom*, 181-192.

Oddly enough, Bismarck, who had tried to suppress the socialist movement to the point of outlawing it, planted the seeds for this development with his protectionist trade policies, government subsidies, universal male suffrage, insurance schemes, and the promotion of an environment in which cartelization of industry was to develop.

Gustave Le Bon, the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century French psychologist, famously examined the actions of persons in groups as opposed to the actions of individuals. He found that rationality is significantly dampened under the influence of crowds in which “every sentiment and act is contagious”⁸³ and in which one is made to “feel, think, and act in a manner quite different from that in which each...would feel, think, and act were he in a state of isolation.”⁸⁴ This became an important consideration in the dawning twentieth century because of the power of the crowd to induce assimilation and harmonization of behaviors.⁸⁵

In the culture of the German empire, the group was actively promoted as a means of societal regulation. This may be seen in something as simple as sport. Nineteenth-century England valued competitive individual athletic contests, such as “boxing, swimming, and rowing [which encourage] coarseness, and a superficial mind, [and] whose sole endeavour is always to win the first prize”⁸⁶ whereas “Germans favored group calisthenics and exercises.”⁸⁷ This aspect of German culture made it one in which a group, whether it be pan-German nationalistic or socialistic/communistic, could exert influence disproportionate to its size upon its members who would be loath to step outside of the group and question the overall direction of events. This is not a quality that would act to actively hinder movement towards war.

⁸³ Le Bon, *The Crowd*, 10.

⁸⁴ Le Bon, *The Crowd*, 6.

⁸⁵ Kershaw, *To Hell and Back*, 16.

⁸⁶ Heinrich von. Treitschke, *Selections from Treitschke's Lectures on Politics* (New York: Frederick. A. Stokes Co., 1914), 103.

⁸⁷ Watts, “Extracts.”

Section Two – The Economic Environment

The Western economic environment during the period of the German empire was roughly divided into two parts: slow or depressed growth from 1873 until about 1895 and then marked improvement from 1895 until the beginning of the First World War. The Second Industrial Revolution of the second half of the nineteenth century truly electrified the world and brought forth new industries such as chemical manufacturing and transformed the practice of others.⁸⁸ Great feats of engineering such as the building of lengthy bridges, tall buildings, and extensive tunnels were accomplished across the Western world. Germany, with engineers such as Gottlieb Daimler and Karl Benz, was the foremost center of the development of the internal combustion engine and the emerging automobile. The Eiffel Tower and the Ferris Wheel may be considered emblematic of the engineering accomplishments of this time.

The new Germany was well-positioned in a central location. Interestingly, the same central location that was a military challenge was an economic benefit. Excellent ports in Hamburg and Bremen thrived and flourished. Germany was a world leader in the new technical sciences and the new modern industrial workplace they engendered.⁸⁹

Even accounting for the slower growth of the first two decades, the German economy of the Empire was expanding overall with rising standards of living and an evolving job market. In comparison to its European neighbors, the post-unification German economy grew much faster and Germany quickly improved its industrial position vis-à-vis these other countries:

Between 1815 and 1870 Russia, Prussia, Austria, and France carried about equal weight on the world stage, behind Britain. Thereafter the new Germany powered ahead, becoming recognised as by far the most successful continental

⁸⁸ Berghahn, *Europe in the Era of Two World Wars*, 8.

⁸⁹ “German Industrial Conditions Before 1914,” in *Documents of German History*, ed. Louis L. Snyder (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1958), 305.

nation, world leader in almost every industrial sphere from pharmaceuticals to automobile technology.⁹⁰

Between the 1870s and the 1910s, German iron production increased nine times as it easily overtook Britain as the top European producer. By 1914, German steel production exceeded the combined total production of Britain, France, and Russia together.⁹¹ Other products followed a similar route as the German industrial bases expanded rapidly in size. German exports tripled between 1880 and 1910.⁹²

By 1910 Germany's percentage of world manufacturing had pulled ahead of Britain. In fact, by the First World War, Germany's "share of the world's industrial production quadrupled, to second place behind the United States. During the same time, Britain's share decreased by a third, and it dropped from first place to third."⁹³

But the British decline was a *relative one* as compared to Germany. In fact, both countries' production had increased *objectively*. Still the relative decline vis-à-vis the Germans was a hard pill to swallow for the British public and for the national newspapers who continually grumbled and whinged about the situation. These remonstrations fed a growing anti-German sentiment in the early twentieth century.⁹⁴

One reason for the explosion of German industrialization was the emphasis placed on education in general and on science and technology in the educational curricula in particular. Beginning in the 1820s, Prussian children were required to attend school full-time from the ages of seven to fourteen and "by the nineties [Germany] had two and a half times as many university

⁹⁰ Hastings, *Catastrophe 1914*, 4.

⁹¹ Berghahn, *Europe in the Era of Two World Wars*, 8-9, and McDonough, *The Origins of the First and Second World Wars*, 3.

⁹² "German Industrial Conditions Before 1914," 309.

⁹³ Christopher M. Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (New York: Harper, 2013), 165.

⁹⁴ Barth, "Imperialism."

students in proportion to the population as England.”⁹⁵ By the turn of the century, many German scientists were internationally acclaimed authorities in their fields. The names of Koch, Ehrlich, Röntgen, and Plank, along with many others, are still instantly recognizable.

This increasing economic activity provided workers with more opportunity, an increase of leisure time, and an ability to consume products beyond a level of subsistence.⁹⁶ This marginal improvement in living conditions had an effect contrary to what might be expected. As de Tocqueville noted, when misery is no longer absolute and all-encompassing, it becomes less acceptable.⁹⁷ When people are no longer completely beleaguered by the circumstances of their existence, they begin to question the reasons for that wretched existence. Dissatisfaction and agitation may then materialize. During his period as German *Reichskanzler* (imperial chancellor), Otto von Bismarck tried to quell some of this restiveness and diminish the attraction of socialism with great increases in social spending. Health insurance, unemployment compensation, and a pension system were introduced.⁹⁸ As the Austrian economist Ludwig von Mises explains,

Bismarck’s idea of social security was that he wanted everybody to receive something from the government. He compared the situation with that of the French, many of whom owned government bonds and received interest. He thought that was why the French were so patriotic; they were receiving something from the government. Bismarck wanted the individual German, too, to depend on the government. So, he started an additional government bonus of 50 Marks to every old-age pensioner. This was called the *Reichszuschuss*.⁹⁹

Here Bismarck was wrong. People who are given unearned things from others for the purpose of placating them or assuaging their negative frame of mind actually despise the giver,

⁹⁵ Tuchman, *The Proud Tower*, 304.

⁹⁶ Berghahn, *Europe in the Era of Two World Wars*, 10.

⁹⁷ Hastings, *Catastrophe 1914*, 3.

⁹⁸ Hastings, *Catastrophe 1914*, 4, and Alan Sked, “Belle Époque: Europe before 1914,” in *The Oxford Handbook of European History, 1914-1945*, ed. Nicholas Doumanis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 31.

⁹⁹ Ludwig von Mises, *Marxism Unmasked: From Delusion to Destruction* (Irvington-on-Hudson, N.Y: Foundation for Economic Education, 2006. Lectures given in 1952.), 60.

knowing the cynical reasons for which the largesse is given. They soon come to expect the payment and to feel entitled to it. They will despise the giver even more if the unmerited compensation is discontinued. Those sympathetic to the Socialist Party took the money but were not placated. Therefore, Bismarck took more blunt action by banning the Socialist party and its trade unions in an effort to curtail the socialist thorn in his side.¹⁰⁰

Germany would continue to boost non-military expenditures to a level greater than any other major nation-state. Its education budget quintupled in size by the time of the war.¹⁰¹

The populations of Germany and, indeed, all of Europe were growing along with the economy due to higher standards of living, lower infant mortality, and longer lifespans. Between 1890 and 1914, Germany's population grew from forty-nine million to sixty-six million, an increase of nearly thirty-five percent.¹⁰²

Agricultural employment opportunities decreased due to greater competition for jobs within an expanding population and also due to increasing importation of cheaper agricultural products from especially the United States and Canada. This fueled a migration to the cities of rural Germans who wished to avail themselves of new opportunities provided by the industrializing economy.¹⁰³ The income and work conditions of the urban industrial worker were better than that in agriculture, but poverty continued to be widespread. Class divisions between these workers and the expanding professional, mercantile, and white-collar middle class were well-defined and were strictly observed. Because of these factors, the lure of socialism and communism grew.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁰ Berghahn, "Origins," 19.

¹⁰¹ Sked, "Belle Époque," 27.

¹⁰² McDonough, *The Origins*, 3.

¹⁰³ Ninety per-cent of the increased population was either born in or migrated to the city causing a boom in urbanization. See Antulio J. Echevarria, *Imagining Future War: The West's Technological Revolution and Visions of Wars to Come, 1880-1914* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007), 3.

¹⁰⁴ Berghahn, "Origins," 18, 23.

Memories of the revolutions of 1789, 1848, and 1870 caused the middle and upper classes to support rigorous suppression of worker movements. These memories were mostly not personal ones, but those of the “national mind” spoken about by the contemporary psychologist of mass behavior, Gustav Le Bon. This mind was “the product of a lengthy past... which guides us upon great occasions, especially such as involve national existence.”¹⁰⁵

In this environment, one can easily understand how support for colonialism grew, not only for the perceived economic benefit, but also for the purpose of sending troublemakers abroad.¹⁰⁶ In 1895, the German naval officer Alfred von Tirpitz who would later become naval secretary, stated in a letter to the past Chief of the German Imperial Navy, Albrecht von Stosch, that he feared Germany would lose her position as a great power if colonialism were not pursued “energetically.” As evidence, he cited positive economic effects and how colonialism would act as “a strong palliative against...Social-democrats.”¹⁰⁷

The effects of colonialism were many and varied on the states which engaged in it. These effects were economic, geopolitical, and even spiritual. But it was a commonplace in 1890s Europe that imperialism was a means not only to commercial success but useful as well in obviating and deterring domestic troubles.¹⁰⁸

For some European nations, Britain and France, for example, colonialism was seen as a major component of their economies, foreign policy, and defense establishment. Russia, with its vast size, was little interested in embarking on attempts at colonization. The newly but precariously stable Italy saw colonization as a way to unite its heterogeneous political and national strains of citizenry under a common banner.

¹⁰⁵ Le Bon, *The Psychology of the Great War*, 35-36.

¹⁰⁶ Berghahn, *Europe in the Era of Two World Wars*, 13-14.

¹⁰⁷ Alfred von Tirpitz, *My Memoirs* (New York: Dodd, Mead, & Co., 1919), Vol. 1, 80-81.

¹⁰⁸ Berghahn, “Origins,” 20.

For the German empire, imperialism offered a number of possible benefits including access to natural resources and raw materials not available in Germany and to the space to which it could send its excess population and agitators.¹⁰⁹ Colonial lands were seen by the German public as exotic locales brimming with riches and with natives who would serve as inexpensive sources of labor and buyers of German export goods.¹¹⁰ The Imperial Navy pressed for colonies in order that refueling stations could be constructed in distant lands to aid in the expansion of the navy's sphere of influence.¹¹¹ Most importantly, though, imperialism was a great source of national prestige¹¹² and, as in the case of Italy, a method of increasing the cohesion of a recently united people.¹¹³

Overall, though, the economic effects of the German colonial possessions were of relatively little significance. This was quite unlike the weight carried by the colonies of Britain and France upon the economies of those two countries.¹¹⁴ Ten percent of the foreign trade of France was colonial trade, twenty times the percentage for Germany.¹¹⁵

Germany only came to have colonies in a most haphazard way. Bismarck, to reduce the risk of conflict with other European powers, opted to steer clear of the acquisition of colonies, because “they promised large expenditures, meager profits, and diplomatic complications.”¹¹⁶

¹⁰⁹ Only one per thousand emigrating Germans chose to go to the colonies. See Richard F. Hamilton and Holger H. Herwig, *Decisions for War, 1914-1917* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 14.

¹¹⁰ Clark, *The Sleepwalkers*, 141. Also see Mises, *Marxism Unmasked*, 90, where he explains how ridiculous is the rationalization that states might develop colonies to acquire “foreign markets for their production.”

¹¹¹ Steven Press, “Buying Sovereignty: German ‘Weltpolitik’ and Private Enterprise, 1884–1914,” *Central European History* 55, no. 1 (2022): 32.

¹¹² German History in Documents and Images, “Society for German Colonization, Founding Manifesto (March 28, 1885),” Forging an Empire: Bismarckian Germany (1866-1890), https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=667

¹¹³ Barth, “Imperialism.”

¹¹⁴ Barth, “Imperialism.”

¹¹⁵ Oron J. Hale, *The Great Illusion, 1900-1914* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 9.

¹¹⁶ German History in Documents and Images, “Bismarck on ‘Pragmatic’ Colonization (June 26, 1884),” Forging an Empire: Bismarckian Germany (1866-1890), https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=1868 and Hamilton and Herwig, *Decisions for War, 1914-1917*, 15.

He was able to continue this colonial policy until the middle years of the 1880s when pressure began to mount from propagandists such as Dr. Friedrich Fabri, the professed “father of the German colonial movement,” who pressured Bismarck to develop a “colonizing vocation.” Fabri, a theologian, cited multiple reasons in pressing for colonization. He described what he saw as great economic benefit of possessing colonies, the opportunity for the German Empire to establish itself among the world’s great powers, and “the psychological impression which a well-run, large-scale and successful emigration would soon have on the imagination” of malcontents such as Social Democrats. But probably most important for this educator of missionaries was the prospect of Germany filling the role of the “bearer of a cultural mission” to refine the uncivilized natives.¹¹⁷

Bismarck yielded in 1884 with Germany establishing colonies on both the east and west coasts of lower Africa. This *volte-face* was decided upon only with reluctance; Bismarck, having “not abandoned [his] former aversion to colonies,” acquiesced in the face of rising pressure from the public and the Reichstag.¹¹⁸ After the 1884 Congo Conference in Berlin during which the Belgian king, Leopold II, had been given control over the mineral-rich Congo Basin, Bismarck began to apprehend the electoral advantages of a foray into colonialism with its perceived benefits to the nation as a whole. He still did not think imperialism was in the best interests of Germany, but he felt that being on the right side of the colonial issue might benefit pro-government candidates in forthcoming elections for seats in the Reichstag.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ German History in Documents and Images, “Friedrich Fabri, *Does Germany Need Colonies?* (1879),” Forging an Empire: Bismarckian Germany (1866-1890), https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=1867

¹¹⁸ William Harbutt Dawson, *Bismarck and State Socialism: An Exposition of the Social and Economic Legislation of Germany Since 1870*, 2nd ed. (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1890), 150.

¹¹⁹ German History in Documents and Images, “Bismarck on ‘Pragmatic’ Colonization,” and Berghahn, “Origins,” 20. Also see “The Beginning of German Colonialism, 1882-1885,” in *Documents of German History*, ed. Louis L. Snyder (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1958), 252-55.

“Guiding principles of German colonial policy” were considered and approved by the Reichstag after Bismarck’s acquiescence. According to Bismarck, investors and entrepreneurs should expect little help and no guarantee of success from the Reich’s government:

The Reich has no obligation to indemnify German entrepreneurs in overseas countries in the event of losses, or to secure favorable results for them in the economic field. The advantages which the protection of the empire affords to members of the empire who intend to colonize uncivilized areas in foreign parts of the world lie chiefly in safeguarding the area to be colonized against disturbances and encroachments by other colonial powers...Overcoming the resistance of wild natives and other natural and local obstacles inherent in the nature of the country to be colonized must remain the task of the entrepreneurs.¹²⁰

In a separate vein, Bismarck eschewed any attempts at nation-building, writing that “it does not belong in the program of German colonial policy to advocate the creation of state institutions among barbarian peoples and to establish there an administrative and judiciary order that corresponds to our views.”¹²¹ But Bismarck did find himself in agreement with

one item that had been taken up at the Congo Conference, which was that the Reich “has taken on the honorable obligation...together with other European nations, to participate in the civilization of Africa... The first prerequisite for the success of civilizing efforts is the stopping of slave exports and the hunts and wars associated with them... So long as this trade and its brutal acts of violence exist, Africa lacks the conditions of existence of a human cultural life.”¹²²

Bismarck’s colonial reluctance had been prescient. As it was revealed in the fullness of time, these colonies were more of a drag than a boon. For most countries, the truth was that the “costs of administration, protection, and services considerably exceeded the value of trade and raw materials produced by the colonies.”¹²³ And in Germany, the amount spent supporting its colonies between 1894 and 1913 was greater than the amount of total commerce with them (only

¹²⁰ “Motive, Berlin, 14 January 1889,” Otto-von-Bismarck-Stiftung (Otto von Bismarck Foundation), *Schriften* (Writings), ed. Natalie Wohleben, accessed 20 Jan 2024, <https://www.bismarck-biografie.de/en/quellen/schriften/988-1889-01-14-motive>

¹²¹ “Motive, Berlin, 14 January 1889,” Otto-von-Bismarck-Stiftung.

¹²² “Motive, Berlin, 14 January 1889,” Otto-von-Bismarck-Stiftung.

¹²³ Hale, *The Great Illusion, 1900-1914*, 9.

0.5 percent of Germany's international trade).¹²⁴ Because of this, by the middle of the first decade of the twentieth century, the shine had come off *die Äpfel* and enthusiasm in Germany had dimmed for colonialism. Many businessmen who had been staunch supporters only a few years earlier and had promoted the funding of a large navy to protect German colonies were having second thoughts. They had begun to apprehend the scarcity of capital and the poor risk/reward ratio of colonial ventures. Low rates of return compared to the substantial risk involved meant that fewer investors were willing to commit that scarce capital to these ventures.¹²⁵

During the same time, both Chancellors Bülow and Bethman-Hollweg realized that they were unable to finance increased military spending while underwriting costly colonial expenses.¹²⁶ As an example, the wars against the Herero and Nama peoples in German South West Africa were certainly a costly hindrance, both economically and morally.

The inability of Germany to fund both a growing military and colonial aspirations was due to a lack of access to adequate capital. As explained by Niall Ferguson in *The Pity of War*, “the most important economic factor in in early twentieth-century world politics was not the growth of the German economic power at all. Rather, it was the immense extent of British financial power.” Even in the face of a burgeoning German economy that raced past that of the British over the years after German unification, the British had maintained their exceptionally tight grip on world finance in the London banking district.¹²⁷

As to the colonies themselves, relationships with neighboring colonies were usually peaceful and beneficial, regardless of the nationalities of the other colonies. These settlements

¹²⁴ Hamilton and Herwig, *Decisions for War, 1914-1917*, 14.

¹²⁵ Hewitson, *Germany and the Causes*, 30.

¹²⁶ Hewitson, *Germany and the Causes*, 23.

¹²⁷ Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War* (London: Allen Lane, 1998), 34-35.

traded between themselves and felt a bond, regardless of nationality, as fellow European inhabitants of foreign and often foreboding lands.¹²⁸

One set of particularly important economic subnarratives in pre-war Europe was the German naval buildup targeting British supremacy on the oceans and the subsequent competitive expansion of the land forces of the continental states. These military contests not only had great geopolitical ramifications for the opposing countries, but economic implications as well. The economic aspects of this monumentally important subject will be discussed here. In chapter four, the geopolitical attributes will be considered.

Economically, the arms races had two great effects. One was the simple allocation of limited funds. The other effect was of greater long-term importance and of more interest, directly affecting how funds were procured.

In the UK, the Liberal party had won the elections of 1906 on a plan of reducing military spending. The Liberals' plan was to then use these 'savings' to fund social programs in an effort to purchase working-class votes for the Liberal party by way of government largesse. When the Germans rebuffed any overtures aimed at jointly reducing expenditures on battleships and other armaments, the British Liberal government simply decided to continue its outlays on the naval race while concurrently financing the shiny new social agenda. It did this by introducing the first-ever direct tax in Britain on income.¹²⁹

Of course, this new income tax was supposed to be paid by only the wealthiest citizens. The middle class was enticed to support the new tax scheme through the allusion that by raising money in order to throw a couple of bones to the workers, the new social programs would fend

¹²⁸ Neiberg, "Introduction," 4.

¹²⁹ Berghahn, "Origins," 29.

off a socialist worker's uprising which might end in the nationalization of wealth. This income tax was specifically designed to start at a low rate and be incrementally raised in the future.¹³⁰

Germany, by spurning any efforts to decrease military spending, was facing the same issue of boosting government revenues. Germany already had a system of social insurance which had been instituted by Bismarck in the 1880s. Bülow was now trying to enhance benefits to draw voters away from the Social Democrats, socialist trade unions, or any other instruments of socialist or communist chicanery.

The Reichstag rejected any new or increased direct taxes (no direct income tax as in Britain) but voted to increase indirect taxes on food and other commonly used items of daily need. This, of course, was thought to affect the lower classes more, although they would actually be paying less because they consumed less than the upper classes. The Social Democrats unsurprisingly used the circumstances to loudly remonstrate against the majority in the Reichstag.¹³¹

Those persons who were displeased about the situation, though, were not just the socialists and the working class. Albert Ballin, a shipping magnate based in Hamburg and close friend of Wilhelm, warned the kaiser and *Reichskanzler* Bülow that the Germans could not afford a naval arms race with Great Britain. Ballin also "feared a further escalation of tensions that the building of battleships had already produced" feeling that "a major war...would be a disaster for his shipping empire and for world trade."¹³²

By the time Germany admitted defeat in the naval arms race, a greater urgency had developed. Germany was most suited to its traditional role as great land power and by 1912 (as

¹³⁰ H. V. Emy, *Liberals, Radicals and Social Politics 1892–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 201-02.

¹³¹ Berghahn, "Origins," 29.

¹³² Berghahn, "Origins," 30.

will be discussed in chapter four) the pre-eminence of its land forces was being challenged by the entente of France and Russia. The General Staff began repeatedly asking for funds to increase the size of its standing army.

Along with passing an initial Reichstag bill to increase the army by a rather insignificant twenty-nine thousand active troops, the Lex Bassermann-Erzberger was passed. This law required the government to institute a general property tax by the end of the next April.¹³³ In addition, the Reichstag also approved the implementation of a one-year direct tax on income, the *Wehrbeitrag*. This complex tax bill also again increased indirect taxes.¹³⁴

A major concept one may take from this discussion of the social and economic currents present in Germany during the Second Reich is that the kaiser, the government ministers, military officers, and the rest of the German leadership were operating in a domestic environment that was far from stable. The buffeting storms of socialism, militarism, nationalism, imperialism, and the economy were pervasive predicaments to surmount. And yet, Germany responded to these challenges in ways that were consistent with the methods of its neighboring countries. There is nothing in the way Germany responded socially or economically to its domestic challenges that could be impeached as beyond the norm or as provocative to international stability.

¹³³ Berghahn, "Origins," 32.

¹³⁴ Berghahn, "Origins," 33.

Chapter Three: Information Considerations

The information component of the DIMES model is vital in that it allows the other components to function. No system, whether it be social, economic, or geopolitical, can exist without the proper use and dissemination of information.

The latter nineteenth and the early twentieth century saw a striking transformation in the ability to transmit information. The inventions of the telegraph, telephone, and international mail services revolutionized the information world of the *Fin de Siècle* as dramatically as the computer revolution has transformed our modern world. Importantly, the establishment of these information services was accompanied by international standardization and agreements. For example, in 1865, the International Telegraph Union was launched, as was the International Postal Union in 1875.¹ One could now drop off a letter in London and see it reliably delivered to Berlin in good time. In the event of critical developments, which were many and varied during the period upon which this paper is focused, instructions to ambassadors and diplomats could be telegraphed without delay. By the 1890s, telegraphy was being used liberally and routinely. The ambassadorial class found its rather relaxed lifestyle rapidly becoming more hectic due to the volume and speed of telegraphic messaging.² With the advent of telegraphy, consultation between leaders of countries could ensue without the need for travel. Unfortunately, ease of use allowed for *faux pas*. In 1896 Wilhelm II's use of a telegram to the South African Boer leader Paul Kruger caused an international stir.³ This will be considered more fully below. More positively, Kaiser Wilhelm and his cousin Tsar Nicholas maintained a telegraphic exchange of

¹ John Keegan, *The First World War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 12.

² David Stevenson, "Diplomats," in *The Cambridge History of the First World War*, Vol. 2, *The State*, ed. Jay Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 70.

³ "The Kruger Telegram, 1896," in *Documents of German History*, ed. Louis L. Snyder (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1958), 278-79. This is not unlike today's users of X firing off commentary without first thinking.

numerous messages per day in the last days before the Great War erupted in an attempt to slow or completely forestall the buildup to military confrontation.⁴

The exchanges between the tsar and the kaiser are also a lesson in how improved communications do not necessarily lead to better results. During this critical period directly before the war, the observations, instructions, and directives of the supposed autocrats were given little, if any, notice. Both leaders were mostly ignored and then were informed by their respective military and political functionaries that the events had taken on a life of their own and could not be halted.

With the development of railways, steam- and coal-powered ships, and, at a later date, the automobile, one could even transport one's own self relatively quickly to convey information, diplomatic proposals, contracts, or to consult with others in person.

A possible downside to the rapidity of information transmission was the loss of time the respective parties had enjoyed in a slower-moving world to consider their options. Those who received an important communication might feel pressure to respond quickly and those who sent the communication might begin to wonder what was transpiring to prevent a quick answer. This was a new paradigm, and it would take time for an adjustment to it to occur.

Norman Angell expressed such a concern in his book *The Great Illusion* which was referenced earlier in chapter two. His apprehension is that "the outcome of purely modern conditions (e.g. rapidity of communication) have rendered the problems of modern international politics profoundly and essentially different from the ancient; yet our ideas are still dominated by

⁴ "The 'Willy-Nicky Telegrams,'" in *The World War I Reader: Primary and Secondary Sources*, ed. Michael S. Nieberg (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 46-49. This exchange was an addition to a decades-long written correspondence maintained by the kaiser and the tsar. See The World War I Document Archive, "Willy-Nicky Letters between the Kaiser and the Czar," Official Papers, last modified 28 May 2009, https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Willy-Nicky_Letters_between_the_Kaiser_and_the_Czar

the principles and axioms, images and terminology of the bygone days.”⁵ As so often occurs today, the technological changes had outstripped the ability of the people to adjust to it properly.

An additional consideration, one with both positive and negative effects, was the vast increase in the amount of information available to consult and review. Newspapers, books, journals, etc., were available in quantities unimaginable only a few decades previously. Also, when it is easy to quickly send a communication, more are sent.⁶ Obviously this increased volume of information could aid in taking proper decisions, but it could just as easily overwhelm and confuse.

The nuanced features of the concept of information are many and varied. One may be influenced or controlled by information or, conversely, one may attempt to influence and control information in an attempt to manipulate others. Applied to geopolitical machinations, it is vitally important to discern which streams of the flood of information to which one is subjected are accurate, authentic, and serviceable. One must evaluate whether the information received is complete and one must consider whether or not that information is being released or provided in a manner to attempt to manipulate or sway one’s response.

As important as separating the wheat from the chaff in a harvest of information is discerning when all the needed information is or is not present. Sometimes this is not possible as Donald Rumsfeld has famously quipped: “There are known knowns, things we know that we know; and there are known unknowns, things that we know we don’t know. But there are also unknown unknowns, things we do not know we don’t know.”⁷ Maybe a bit less of a mouthful, but still useful is this thought from Mark Twain: “What gets us into trouble is not what we don’t

⁵ Norman Angell, *The Great Illusion* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1913), xiii.

⁶ Consider the number of cellular phone texts sent daily by many teenagers.

⁷ “DoD News Briefing - Secretary Rumsfeld and Gen. Myers,” U.S. Department of Defense. 12 Feb 2002, <http://archive.defense.gov/Transcripts/Transcript.aspx?TranscriptID=2636>

know. It's what we know for sure that just ain't so."⁸ This lack of information played a great role in the escalatory posturing and gamesmanship that spawned the First World War. Despite the warnings from those such as Jan Bloch, none of the participants in this dangerous game had the vaguest notion what they were about to release.

Methods to separate out usable kernels of information and to discover those unknown unknowns were consistently employed by German leaders. For example, members of the General Staff read foreign military journals to obtain factual and accurate information on other militaries.⁹ And of course, the ancient and hoary trade of espionage was in constant use. The most notable agent was the Baltic German Benno von Siebert who worked as an undersecretary in the Russian embassy in London. Siebert passed much valuable information to the Germans in the last year or two prior to the war. The most noteworthy kernel of intelligence was that the British foreign secretary Edward Grey was lying to the Germans about Anglo-Russian naval cooperation. Therefore, because the Germans knew unequivocally through Siebert that Grey was lying to them, they realized they could trust nothing the British said to them in the run-up to the war.¹⁰

During the first three decades of the German Empire, the mass press expanded voluminously. During the last three decades of the nineteenth century, the number of newspapers sent through the postal system increased by eight times. By the outbreak of the First World War, there were at least three thousand different newspapers – fifty in Berlin alone – all with their own

⁸ Robert Hall, "Overcoming Convention: What You Know For Sure That Ain't So," *ABA Bank Marketing* (July-August 2011): 10-11.

⁹ Mark Hewitson, *Germany and the Causes of the First World War* (Oxford, UK: Berg, 2004), 134.

¹⁰ Christopher M. Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (New York: Harper, 2013), 421, Samuel R. Williamson Jr. and Ernest R. May, "An Identity of Opinion: Historians and July 1914," *The Journal of Modern History* 79, no. 2 (2007): 349, and Jean-Jacque Becker and Gerd Krumeich, "1914: Outbreak," in *The Cambridge History of the First World War*, Vol. 1, *Global War*, ed. Jay Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 48.

distinct perspective.¹¹ In Berlin alone there were Papers across the political and religious spectrum sold millions of copies daily. These included the unaffiliated *Berliner Morgenpost* and *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung*, the liberal *Berliner Tageblatt*, the socialist *Vorwärts* and *Der Wahre Jakob*, and the nationalist *Leipziger Neueste Nachrichten*, *Berliner Neueste Nachrichten* and *Rheinisch-Westfälische Zeitung*. Each copy was estimated to have been read by multiple people and so, each day, millions upon millions of Germans received the latest news and commentary. They were quite well-informed, indeed. This was a major change from only a few decades previously when the common person was generally quite ignorant of the machinations of the government.¹²

These newspapers with their diverse viewpoints maintained a vigorous exchange of ideas. For example, when nationalist newspapers attacked the Russians (figuratively, of course) during the low points of German-Russian relations in the course of the Bosnian Annexation Crisis and the Balkan Wars, other newspapers of the center and left felt free to make the opposite arguments as they considered appropriate.¹³ No less than in other Western countries, there existed a considerable amount of freedom of the press in the German Empire. This right to a free press was taken seriously, along with the knowledge that all the pre-First World War European monarchs had to act “within constitutional and legal frameworks.”¹⁴

For this reason, public opinion was important to the government and to the kaiser. They made no real effort to stop the free flow of ideas and opinions and they took into account what

¹¹ Max Hastings, *Catastrophe 1914: Europe Goes to War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013), 66-67.

¹² Hewitson, *Germany and the Causes*, 62.

¹³ Hewitson, *Germany and the Causes*, 76.

¹⁴ Alan Sked, “Belle Époque: Europe before 1914,” in *The Oxford Handbook of European History, 1914-1945*, ed. Nicholas Doumanis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 27.

these organs of public thought had to say. This is another illustration that helps to show how the kaiser was far from an autocratic ruler.

As Gustave Le Bon explains in *The Psychology of the Great War*, “public opinion is a force which even monarchs cannot resist. It comes slowly into being and prepares the unconscious will, which usually precedes the conscious will of those who are in authority.”¹⁵ Public opinion is *public* opinion. It is established through the weight of the communal outlook and “propagated by mental contagion” and is “entirely inaccessible to the influence of argument” because even “the most intelligent man loses all his critical faculties when he is surrounded by the collective mind.”¹⁶

German public opinion, consistently opposed to preventative war in general, also did not favor war to obtain colonial dependencies or to militarily aid its Austro-Hungarian ally. During both Moroccan Crises, any thought of war was quickly put to rest due to the pressure of public opinion on the central government.¹⁷ The German people would certainly support a defensive war, but in the years prior to the First World War, they did not consider that a likely prospect.¹⁸ This opinion of *das Volk* was in direct contrast to that of certain upper military brass, particularly the chiefs of the *Großer Generalstab* (General Staff). The elder and younger Moltkes and Alfred von Schlieffen all continually advocated for preventative wars when they felt the odds of success were with them.¹⁹ The weight of public opinion is an especially important reason no preventative war was undertaken by the German military.

¹⁵ Gustave Le Bon, *The Psychology of the Great War* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1916), 227.

¹⁶ Le Bon, *The Psychology of the Great War*, 267-68.

¹⁷ Hewitson, *Germany and the Causes*, 125.

¹⁸ Hewitson, *Germany and the Causes*, 78-79.

¹⁹ Christian Stachelbeck, “Moltke, Helmuth Johannes Ludwig von,” 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. Ute Daniel et al., Freie Universität Berlin, last modified 06 April 2016, DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.10885 and Oliver Stein, “Pre-war Military Planning (Germany),” 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel et al., Freie Universität Berlin, last modified 3 Mar 2021, DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.11515.

Officials from other countries also actively read the German newspapers. They did so in an effort to gauge what the sentiments of the German people were on the principal issues of the day. German officials read the newspapers of other countries, those of their allies as well as those of their perceived adversaries. This was a means by which foreign policy might be adapted and improved. Foreign policy staff personnel were able to develop a sense of how a nation's government might act or react considering what was said in that nation's press.

One notoriously inept newspaper episode involved an interview by Kaiser Wilhelm II with the London newspaper, the *Daily Telegraph*, during which Wilhelm

informed the British that while he loved them, this sentiment was not shared by his subjects. The Kaiser further confided that the German fleet was being built not against Britannia but against America and Japan. Finally, William II claimed that during the Boer War he had headed off Franco-Russian plans to forge a continental block against London and that the Prussian General Staff had drafted the plans that finally brought victory over the Boers.²⁰

All of this was ridiculous, of course. The German public were mortified and incensed. Wilhelm was criticized harshly in the Reichstag. Chastised, Wilhelm retreated to an estate for a time.²¹ The ham-fisted affair put a dent in Wilhelm's aura and afterwards his opinions and announcements carried less authority and influence.²²

Prior to the First World War, the German government tended to react to public opinion as opposed to proactively attempt to form it. There were numerous times when plans were made to take the initiative by mounting a propaganda campaign, but these plans rarely came to fruition.²³ For example, on 8 December 1912 a particularly important meeting of the kaiser and his most

²⁰ Holger H. Herwig, *Hammer or Anvil?: Modern Germany 1648-Present* (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Co., 1994), 172-73, and "The Daily Telegraph Interview, 1908," in *Documents of German History*, ed. Louis L. Snyder (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1958), 294-300.

²¹ Herwig, *Hammer or Anvil?*, 173.

²² Hewitson, *Germany and the Causes*, 199.

²³ Hewitson, *Germany and the Causes*, 6.

important military aides occurred. The key geopolitical features of the meeting will be discussed in the next chapter, but for our purposes at this point it should be noted that a press campaign was planned to prepare the nation for war with Russia.²⁴ Moltke (the younger) felt that war was inescapable and “recommended that the press stir up anti-Russian feeling to make war popular when it came.”²⁵ After the meeting, these plans were forgotten and nothing happened.²⁶

There were times, though, when propaganda was successfully used. During the Second Moroccan Crisis Alfred von Kiderlen-Wächter, the German secretary of foreign affairs, asked Heinrich Class, the leader of the Pan-German League, to initiate a propaganda campaign in support of German efforts in Morocco. As a result, the “nationalist press initiated a public outcry in favor of annexing West Morocco.” Class was certainly successful in creating a hue and cry, but it was difficult for the government to tamp down the furor when a compromise was finally reached that produced gains for Germany nowhere near what was being demanded.²⁷

Propaganda like this can create unreasonable expectations.

Another example of successful manipulation of public opinion is that of Admiral Tirpitz in the early days of *Weltpolitik*, who

used a variety of arguments to convince both parliament and the public that a navy was necessary to avoid decline. This huge and successful propaganda campaign for a battle fleet had a number of consequences: historians were paid to publish on maritime power in history; the sailors’ dress became popular among schoolboys; and a career in the navy became attractive for young men with a bourgeois background who had difficulties reaching higher officer ranks in the still aristocratically dominated army.²⁸

²⁴ Hastings, *Catastrophe 1914*, 31.

²⁵ Ian Kershaw, *To Hell and Back: Europe 1914-1949* (New York: Penguin Books, 2015), 31.

²⁶ German History in Documents and Images, “The ‘War Council’ (December 1912),” *Wilhelmine Germany and the First World War (1890-1918)*, https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=799

²⁷ Boris Barth, “Imperialism,” 1914-1918-online. *International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, ed. Ute Daniel et al., Freie Universität Berlin, last modified 4 Mar 2015, DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.10567.

²⁸ Barth, “Imperialism.”

Propaganda²⁹ was used against the Germans as often as the Germans used it against their adversaries. The countries of the Entente “had mobilized the home front by depicting the war as an epochal struggle against the enemy of all civilized men: the savage ‘Hun,’ the jack-booted, spike-helmeted despoiler.”³⁰ The typical image of the German was “the bloated ‘Prussian Ogre,’ proudly sporting his pickelhaube, (or) the ‘Beastly Hun’ with his sabre-belt barely surrounding his enormous girth.”³¹

What might be seen as positive propaganda was also recommended. If the populations of nations could be manipulated into supporting war, they also might be manipulated into eschewing it. Norman Angell felt this way, thinking that:

by such modification of opinion in Europe that much of the present motive to aggression will cease to be operative, and by thus diminishing the risk of attack, diminishing to the same extent the need for defence.³²

In this chapter, consideration of the information aspect of the German Empire has been in regard to positive information. A brief consideration of negative information, a lack of knowledge, as was touched upon at the beginning of this chapter, is also important.

Lack of factual and reliable information is a perpetual problem. More tragically, one may simply ignore or be unaware of knowledge and insight that does exist. As routinely happens in statecraft, a combination of being ignorant, unaware, and dismissive of available information

²⁹ Propaganda is usually understood with a negative connotation. But see Philip M. Taylor, *Munitions of the Mind: A History of Propaganda*, 3rd ed. (Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press, 2003), 2, in which he explains that propaganda is merely “a process for the sowing, germination and cultivation of ideas and, as such, is – or at least should be – neutral as a concept.”

³⁰ Kevin Cramer, “A World of Enemies: New Perspectives on German Military Culture and the Origins of the First World War,” *Central European History*, 39, no. 2 (Jun 2006): 271. Also see Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Vol. 1, *Form and Actuality*, 594-95. Spengler touched upon the question of Germany’s war guilt. His view is that if the world press had not been controlled through London and Paris, Germany would not have been so easily blamed.

³¹ Taylor, *Munitions of the Mind*, 180. Also see 180-81: Propaganda, although it may be ridiculous, is often believed. During the war, it was reported in the British press, and believed widely by the British people, that the Germans operated a ‘corpse-conversion factory’ to make soap for the home front from dead German soldiers. The factory was actually using deceased horses to produce soap and other items, a common practice at the time.

³² Angell, *The Great Illusion*, xiii.

occurred in Europe in the early twentieth century. This caused the countries of Europe to sail straight into a maelstrom that decimated the continent. Although Jan Bloch and others had warned of the physical devastation of modern warfare, and although Angell and others had warned of the less-material ruin that was likely in war, the brinkmanship continued until the pot boiled over.

One result of this lack of knowledge (the Short War Illusion), will be considered more fully in the next chapter which examines the geopolitical actions of the Second Reich.



Chapter Four: Military and Diplomatic Policies and Strategies of the German Empire – Geopolitics –

A study of the German Empire reveals its composition to be of two constituent halves. These halves are nearly the same in duration, yet they are quite different in approach to geopolitical affairs.

Wilhelm I was kaiser during most of the first period, having been proclaimed first German emperor at Versailles on 18 January 1871 in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War.¹ The *Reichskanzler* (German chancellor) throughout his reign was the Prussian Otto von Bismarck.

The second period began with the dismissal of Bismarck by the new kaiser Wilhelm II, grandson of Wilhelm I. Wilhelm II and the series of chancellors appointed by him approached matters in a very different way than had Bismarck and the elder Wilhelm.

Had the geopolitical strategies and procedures of the first period been continued through the second, one finds it difficult to imagine the First World War occurring. This is not to say that the war was the result of German actions during the Wilhelmine period, but that the entire continent would have been less apt to test the limits of goodwill had the cautious nature of Bismarckian diplomacy been continued throughout Europe.

This chapter addresses the core of this paper, the military and diplomatic policies and strategies of the Second Reich. Note that the general term geopolitics is used to encompass both of those subjects. The thesis of this paper is that the geopolitical actions of the German Empire were consistent with those of its neighboring states and focused on the protection of the German

¹ The World War I Document Archive, "Timeline of Events," Pre-1914 Documents, last modified 29 May 2009, https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Timeline_of_Events. Also see Lynn Abrams, *Bismarck and the German Empire, 1871–1918*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2006), 5.

Empire, not on aggression towards others. This will be consistently noted and demonstrated as the actions of the *Kaiserreich* are discussed and analyzed.

Diplomatic and military foreign policy tends to pursue two distinct, but parallel, principal objectives. The first and most obvious of these is to place the subject country in the best possible geopolitical position *vis-à-vis* its counterparts. This is *die Aussenpolitik*. The second principal function of foreign policy has a domestic purpose. It is often utilized in a way that might stabilize the internal political situation, *die Innenpolitik*.

Nineteenth and early twentieth century Europe was a time of revolution and of rumors of revolution. Birthed in the France of the 1790s, socialistic revolution surfaced repeatedly – in the so-called Springtime of the Peoples in 1848-49, the Paris Commune of 1871, and the Russian Revolution of 1905 – like the regenerating heads of the Lernaean Hydra.

Foreign policy successes were fundamental to maintaining the authority of the ruling classes and the monarchies. Because of this, officials had to continuously walk a fine line between the alliance-burdened foreign policy front and the potentially revolutionary home front.

In the first phase of the geopolitical strategy of the *Kaiserreich*, Bismarck maintained a firm grip on policy, both foreign and domestic. The elder Wilhelm certainly made his opinions known, but the final decisions taken were usually those of Bismarck who sometimes found himself working around the kaiser. This was the situation in 1879 when Bismarck entered into a military alliance with Austria-Hungary. Wilhelm fulminated against this Dual Alliance (*der Zweibund*) but Bismarck, who had assumed full control of German foreign policy, moved forward.²

² “Foreign and Alliance Policy: 1871-1890,” Otto-von-Bismarck-Stiftung (Otto von Bismarck Foundation), ed. Natalie Wohlleben, accessed 27 Dec 2023, <https://www.bismarck-biografie.de/en/politik/aussen-und-buendnispolitik-1871-1890>

Overall, though, Wilhelm I trusted Bismarck's instincts and allowed him to direct the course of the imperial ship of state. This set of circumstances would change drastically under Wilhelm's grandson, Wilhelm II. The younger Wilhelm and the aging Bismarck rarely were on the same page concerning geopolitical issues.

In preparation for a discussion of specifics of the geopolitical choreography of the German Second Reich, it is important to understand the philosophies and circumstances that informed the direction, composition, and arrangement of German diplomatic and military foreign relations. Military ideas basic to the German Empire will first be examined, followed by more general considerations of diplomacy.

Within the domain of German military thought, one figure towers above all the rest, that of Carl von Clausewitz. Clausewitz was an early nineteenth-century Prussian general and military theorist who was actively involved in the Napoleonic Wars. His greatest work, *Vom Kriege* (*On War*) was published posthumously after his early death at fifty-one.³

Clausewitz scaled the steps to the acme of military theorists by way of a German-led reaction to the perniciously maladaptive form of Enlightenment thought which had revealed itself during the French Revolution. Enlightenment ideology taught that any and all things could be understood through use of Reason.⁴ This thinking was certainly appropriate for material sciences, but far less so for social sciences, theology, and immaterial considerations. It had been the foundation upon which Clausewitz's immediate predecessors, such as fellow Prussian Heinrich Dietrich von Bülow, as well as his contemporary, Antoine-Henri Jomini, had

³ Azar Gat, "Carl von Clausewitz," Encyclopedia Britannica, last modified 12 November 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Carl-von-Clausewitz>

⁴ *Reason* here is purposefully capitalized. During the French Revolution, Reason was personified and 'worshipped' as a goddess. The sacred Cathedral of Notre Dame, the cathedral of our Lady Mary, *Mater Dei*, was renamed the *Temple de la Raison* (the Temple of Reason).

constructed their theories. Bülow used geometric calculations to claim that mathematics “could offer the key to victory by enabling scientific prediction of the outcome before armies engaged in battle.”⁵ Though not attempting as much mathematical precision as Bülow, Jomini still approached warfare scientifically with lines of operation and by identifying “universal principles central to the art of war.” Jomini did so not by personal experience with war but primarily by studying the mid-eighteenth-century battles of Frederick the Great.⁶

Clausewitz, in contrast, saw his first combat at age twelve.⁷ He wrote from a position of long and intimate knowledge with real and actual battle, the fog and friction of war, and he wrote from the social vantage of reaction to the ‘enlightened’ excesses of the French Revolution. This reaction helped fuel a *neudeutsch* approach in thinking that acknowledged the complex nature of the world that resisted any simple quasi-scientific explanations.⁸ Part of this reaction to the Enlightenment excesses was in the form of the developing social period of Romanticism. Germany was a major center of this movement as attested by the works of Beethoven, Brahms, Goethe, and Schiller. The roiling of the waters of the post-Enlightenment period produced a newer, more holistic and philosophical way of thinking and analysis. This method, as opposed to the *faux mathématiques* of the Enlightenment analyses of Jomini and Bülow, was the method of Clausewitz.⁹

⁵ Mark T. Calhoun, “Clausewitz And Jomini: Contrasting Intellectual Frameworks in Military Theory,” *Army History* 80 (2011): 25.

⁶ Calhoun, “Clausewitz And Jomini,” 25, 27. Also see Antoine Henri Jomini, *The Art of War*, trans. William Price Craighill and George Henry Mendell (London: Greenhill Books, 2006. Originally published 1862.)

⁷ Donald Stoker, *Clausewitz: His Life and Work* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 11.

⁸ Calhoun, “Clausewitz And Jomini,” 27. Also see David S. Fadok, “Clausewitz and Jomini Revisited,” in *John Boyd and John Warden: Air Power’s Quest for Strategic Paralysis* (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University Press, 1995), 34-35.

⁹ The philosophy of Clausewitz is fully accessible through his masterwork, *On War*, as well as his early short work, *Principles of War*. See Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989. Originally published in Germany in 1832 as *Vom Kriege*.), and Carl Von Clausewitz, *Principles of War*, trans. Hans W. Gatzke (London: John Lane the Bodley Head; Stephen Austin and Sons, Ltd, 1943). To sample Clausewitz’s method of analytic thinking, see Carl von Clausewitz, *Carl von Clausewitz: Two Letters on Strategy*, ed. by Peter Paret and Daniel Moran (Fort Leavenworth, KS: U.S. Army

The writings of Clausewitz are acknowledged to be the philosophical focus that formed the foundation of German military policy from the *Einigungskriegen* through the Second World War. Understanding the thinking of Clausewitz is important for two reasons. First, one cannot understand the actions of the German military during this time period without understanding the writings of Clausewitz. Second, many persons have used a misunderstanding and outright misrepresentations of these writings to demean the German military and the German people as a whole. This will be illustrated below.

In *Vom Kriege*, Clausewitz details many of the methods and practices that became characteristic of the German army over the next century. Among these were the concepts of *Schwerpunkt* and *Vernichtungskrieg*.

Schwerpunkt is typically defined as directing and concentrating one's forces at the point of main attack. An attacker can use this concept both strategically and tactically. As a strategic concept, an attacker might consider directing his most concentrated effort at the "seizure of his (the enemy's) capital," at a specific army formation, or at the army of an adversary's ally.¹⁰ As a tactical concept, the attackers would, as Milan Vego explains, aim "the weight of effort (*Angriffsschwerpunkt*) where they believed the enemy had his weakest forces, either in numbers or in terms of quality."¹¹ Vego continues: "Clausewitz firmly believed that the destruction or neutralization of the enemy's forces was the means to final victory. Identifying the *Schwerpunkt* would enable the attacker to effect those means."¹²

Command and General Staff College, 1994), and Peter Paret, "Two Letters On Strategy," in *Understanding War: Essays on Clausewitz and the History of Military Power* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 123–29.

¹⁰ Clausewitz, *On War*, 596.

¹¹ Milan Vego, "Clausewitz's *Schwerpunkt*: Mistranslated from German – Misunderstood in English," *Military Review* (January-February 2007): 102.

¹² Vego, "Clausewitz's *Schwerpunkt*, 103.

Schwerpunkt is one of the primary means to a Clausewitzian end: *Vernichtungsschlacht* (battle of annihilation) within a *Vernichtungskrieg* (war of annihilation). *Schwerpunkt* in combination with *Vernichtungsschlacht* is often considered to form the essential core of German warfare from the time of Clausewitz through the period of the Third Reich.¹³

Some, such as Isabel Hull, see this in an almost religious context. Her view is that the post-Clausewitz German military “established as canonical” during the Wars of Unification “that the proper way to fight was to concentrate nearly all one’s forces at a single point with the Clausewitzian aim of totally destroying the foe’s military force.” She avers that the Germans (specifically Chief of the General Staff Helmut von Moltke) made “hostile revisions” to Clausewitz’s thinking and these philosophies were then “galvanized and transformed during the three wars of German unification...to inaugurate a new kind of warfare.” This “new kind of warfare,” this *Vernichtungskrieg*, was to Hull the absolute destruction, the wholesale killing, of all one’s enemies.¹⁴

If one feels that the aim of Clausewitz’s annihilation warfare was indiscriminate and comprehensive killing, then one may have read Clausewitz, but one has not read him with prudence and judiciousness. And those that misread this thinking into Clausewitz’s writings and acknowledge that his writings form the foundation of German military policy throughout the era, find it an easy jump to a declaration that Germany, the modern Hun, conducted war in a way that paralleled that of Attila.

¹³ Michael Howard, “The Influence of Clausewitz,” in *On War*, by Carl von Clausewitz, ed. and trans. by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 28-36, 41, and Albert T. Lauterbach, “Roots and Implications of the German Idea of Military Society,” *Military Affairs* 5, no. 1 (Spring, 1941): 3.

¹⁴ Isabel V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 110.

Clausewitz's description of warfare does not encourage the indiscriminate killing of one's enemies. At times, he does suggest that natural war is total war. At other times and, most famously, he states that "war is not merely an act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse, carried on with other means."¹⁵ Because of this ambiguity, many people have taken from Clausewitz the parts most useful to them. For Moltke the Elder, it was the concept of the annihilative war. In fact, Clausewitz states in the first chapter of his book that introducing "the principle of moderation into the theory of war itself would always lead to logical absurdity" and that "the impulse to destroy the enemy...is central to the very idea of war."¹⁶

To Clausewitz, though, this idea of 'total' or 'absolute' war is not one that can occur in reality. It is "an abstraction freed of the constraints of time, space, and human nature, a 'logical fantasy' which does not and cannot occur in practice."¹⁷ When Clausewitz details what he is connoting by annihilation warfare, he explains that "the fighting forces must be destroyed: that is, they must be put in such a condition that they can no longer carry on the fight. Whenever we use the phrase 'destruction of the enemy's forces,' this alone is what we mean."¹⁸ By annihilation, by *Vernichtungskrieg*, Clausewitz means not the complete destruction of people, but the complete destruction of the ability of those people to continue fighting. This is the operative concept Moltke took from Clausewitz and employed in his *Einigungskriegen*, his Wars of Unification.

¹⁵ Clausewitz, *On War*, 87.

¹⁶ Clausewitz, *On War*, 76.

¹⁷ Christopher Bassford, "John Keegan and the Grand Tradition of Trashing Clausewitz: A Polemic," *War in History* 1, no. 3 (1994): 324.

¹⁸ Clausewitz, *On War*, 90.

Isabel Hull and others bastardize the term *Vernichtungskrieg* in an effort to impugn the Germans, implying that it is in their DNA to be butchers of men. It is also an attempt to blame colonialism for the development of the mentality of “absolute destruction,” (Hull’s term) but one need only read Thucydides’s accounts of the Sieges of Plataea and Melos during the Peloponnesian Wars¹⁹ or a description of the 1631 Sack of Magdeburg during the Thirty Years War²⁰ to understand that Europeans are perfectly capable of brutal wartime carnage even in the absence of the influence of nineteenth-century colonialism.

This misunderstanding of the concept of *Vernichtungskrieg* must be resolved in order to understand the military mindset of the pre-First World War German empire. To think that the *Kaiserreich* promoted an attitude of wholesale slaughter is not only a gross mischaracterization of history, but an insult to the German people as a whole.

But this is the thinking of Isabel Hull. In her book, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany*, she theorizes that a major aspect of German culture in the late nineteenth century was the role the military took in the overall national ethos, greatly influencing the government’s response to any circumstance or state of affairs. She argues that the experience of the German military in the second stage of the Franco-Prussian War, which metamorphosed into a *Volkskrieg* as a result of the French Republican *levée en masse*, prepared the Germans to conduct annihilative warfare in African colonies and in future European wars.²¹ It was also during this period of time that the concept of social Darwinism was becoming increasingly prevalent. The combination of these two factors, she deduces, greatly

¹⁹ Thucydides, *The War of the Peloponnesians and the Athenians*, ed. Jeremy Mynott (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), III 52.1-68.4 (Plataea), and V 84.1-116.4 (Melos).

²⁰ Cicely V. Wedgwood, *The Thirty Years War* (New York: New York Review Books, 2005), 276-281.

²¹ Jonas Kreienbaum, “Colonial Policy, Colonial Conflicts and War before 1914,” 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. Ute Daniel et al., Freie Universität Berlin, last modified 14 Feb 2022, DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.11556.

influenced the government and military response to the revolt of the Herero in German Southwest Africa (1904-07) and to the concurrent revolt of the Maji-Maji in German East Africa. These experiences are cited by Hull as the most important factors in the development of the philosophy of *Vernichtungskrieg* which, in her thinking, is absolute destruction of people, not the destruction of the ability to continue the fight as was described by Clausewitz. She is redefining the term to fit her preconceived notions of the German mindset.²²

The revolt of the Herero must be put in context. At the time of the uprising, there were only seven hundred German troops in Southwest Africa, and most were in the southern portion of the colony, far from the capital Windhoek, near where the Herero began to plunder farms and murder colonists. 4,600 German colonists found themselves confronted by upwards of 80,000 Herero tribesmen (estimates range from 60-100,000). Kaiser Wilhelm quickly ordered in reinforcements and the Reichstag was asked for an appropriation to fund a much larger military response. These were approved with the caveat that the German military conduct itself with humanity and restraint.²³

This restraint would be hard to come by when the reports of Herero atrocities began to flow in. It was said that women and children were being murdered and their bodies were being desecrated and mutilated. Many of those reports were incorrect, but it was true that the corpses of German soldiers were routinely mutilated. The Herero took no prisoners; all wounded German soldiers were immediately killed with clubs and large knives prior to the desecration of their bodies. The manner in which the Herero fought would seem, by definition, to be a perfect illustration of Hull's perception of *Vernichtungskrieg*. It is not surprising that the Germans

²² Hull, *Absolute Destruction*, 3. In parodic but respectful deference to Dr. Johnson, one should note that redefinition of terms is the last refuge of a scoundrel. An excellent discussion of the practice and consequence of the redefinition of terms may be found in Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom*, 174-75.

²³ Hull, *Absolute Destruction*, 7-8.

turned the tables on the Herero and inflicted the same type of war on them. In addition, it must be noted that the Herero warriors were not a primitive force. Many were well-armed with modern rifles.²⁴

In the face of this resistance, the Germans certainly displayed brutality. This was the rule of the day, and the German treatment of the Herero was comparable to but certainly no more brutal than the treatment of Africans by the British, French, and Italians. But if interactions with Africans were to have cemented in Germans the basic desire for annihilation of people, then it should have produced in the Belgians something far worse. The unspeakably cruel brutality of Belgian behavior in the Congo far outstripped the actions of any other European country in Africa.

Kevin Cramer offers a more nuanced view. His analysis is that modern Germany's understanding of warfare was "powerfully influenced...by memories of the Thirty Years' War, the war of liberation against Napoleon, and Bismarck's wars of unification." These experiences were the foundation of the belief in the concept of *die Einkreisung* – the belief that Germany had perennially been encircled by other nation-states, with the hostile purpose of keeping the German states divided, unable to coalesce to pose a threat to neighboring states.²⁵

Thus, "when Germans talked of war, they talked less of victory and more of confronting the twin threats of defeat and annihilation."²⁶

Because of this gloomy 'kill-or-be-killed' outlook, "the military leadership...not only established itself as a decisive arbiter in foreign policy but...upheld the prerogatives of

²⁴ Hull, *Absolute Destruction*, 10-11.

²⁵ Kevin Cramer, "A World of Enemies: New Perspectives on German Military Culture and the Origins of the First World War," *Central European History*, 39, no. 2 (Jun 2006): 272.

²⁶ Cramer, "A World of Enemies," 272.

absolutism against demands for political liberalization.”²⁷ In other words, the military leadership felt that only it could protect the German state from existential threats both foreign and domestic and it would perform this task with resolve. The military of the *Kaiserreich* continued to be influenced by its foundational and determinative understanding and perception of the Franco-Prussian War that

rejected any conventions or norms that limited its mission to pursue the total destruction of the enemy...The tactic of absolute destruction (“annihilative victory” or *der Vernichtungskrieg*) had been elevated to an operational principle that defined war as a clash between civilizations.²⁸

This development of the primacy of *Vernichtungskrieg* was a direct consequence of the actions of the socialist Third French Republic and its Government of National Defence. The Prussians had defeated the French decisively at the Battle of Sedan. It seemed the end of the conflict and the French emperor Napoleon III dutifully surrendered.²⁹ Back in Paris, the emperor’s government was overthrown. The new government declared a *levée en masse*, mandating that all “able-bodied men between the ages of 21 and 40” heed the call to serve.³⁰ This raised hundreds of thousands of new troops who would fight as poorly trained guerillas and *francs-tireurs* against a professional army. Obviously, against a trained military these types of troops would be routed and destroyed. What had been the *Kabinettskrieg* which ended at Sedan became the *Volkskrieg* which would end only with the Siege of Paris and Metz with many *morts Français* who wouldn’t have been dead but for the revolutionary ideology of the republican

²⁷ Cramer, “A World of Enemies,” 274.

²⁸ Cramer, “A World of Enemies,” 279.

²⁹ Theodore S. Hamerow, ed., *The Age of Bismarck: Documents and Interpretations* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973, 100-104. It is extremely enlightening to read this account of the surrender discussions of Napoleon III with Otto von Bismarck after the Battle of Sedan. The gentlemanly rapport and graciousness exhibited by these leaders is quite admirable.

³⁰ Robert T. Foley, “From Volkskrieg to Vernichtungskrieg: German Concepts of Warfare, 1871–1935,” in *War, Peace and World Orders in European History*, ed. Anja V. Hartmann and Beatrice Heuser (The New International Relations Series. London: Routledge, 2001), 216.

poseurs.³¹ Moltke, who saw war as fought between professionals with gentlemanly rules, was appalled by this action of sacrificing so many civilian lives. He was convinced that now that bridge had been crossed, there would be no going back, and that future wars would invariably become peoples' wars.³² It was as Clausewitz had taught, that "once barriers—which in a sense consist only in man's ignorance of what is possible—are torn down, they are not so easily set up again."³³

The era of the European *Kabinettskrieg* and of the short war was at an end.

Although the thinking of Clausewitz was the foundation upon which future German military philosophy was constructed, the person who had the greatest *direct* effect on the military of the *Kaiserreich* was Chief of the General Staff Helmut von Moltke (the Elder).

It is said by many that Moltke turned an important teaching of Clausewitz (that war is a political tool) on its head.³⁴ This is not exactly true. Moltke had no qualms with the use of war as a political tool.³⁵ It was used this way in the German Wars of Unification. But, when the authorities request war to perform a political purpose, he felt strongly that those authorities must then step aside and allow the war to be conducted by the professional military with no meddling.³⁶

³¹ Michael Howard, *The Franco-Prussian War: The German Invasion of France, 1870-1871* (London: Routledge, 2021), 242-441. These 'republicans' were, of course, communists.

³² Cramer, "A World of Enemies," 295a.

³³ Clausewitz, *On War*, 593.

³⁴ Günter Roth, "Field Marshal von Moltke the Elder His Importance Then and Now," *Army History*, no. 23 (1992): 1.

³⁵ In a letter to Kaiser Wilhelm II, written 9 May 1888, Bismarck specifically mentions the use of war "started voluntarily by us for motives of higher politics." See "Otto von Bismarck to Crown Prince Wilhelm, 9 May 1888," Otto-von-Bismarck-Stiftung (Otto von Bismarck Foundation), *Schriften* (Writings), ed. Natalie Wohlleben, accessed 28 Dec 2023, <https://www.bismarck-biografie.de/en/quellen/schriften/987-1888-05-09-brief-an-kronprinz-wilhelm>

³⁶ If Moltke's beliefs had been followed during the time of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, there may have been a different result. The politicization and micromanagement of the war in Vietnam is notorious. "President Johnson once boasted that the military could not 'bomb an outhouse without my permission.'" See Norman Polmar and Edward J. Marolda, *Naval Air War: The Rolling Thunder Campaign* (Washington, DC: Naval History & Heritage Command, 2015), 3.

The position of Clausewitz was that if “war springs from some political purpose, it is natural that the prime cause of its existence will remain the supreme consideration in conducting it (the war).” and that “the political aim remains the first consideration. Policy, then, will permeate all military operations.”³⁷

This is thinking that Moltke found exasperating. He felt that war should be prosecuted without any outside influence, especially from those who are not warriors. He was accepting of direction from the kaiser but drew the line at meddling or attempts at micromanagement from the kaiser’s political subordinates. Moltke made his opinion clear:

at the moment of mobilization the political adviser should fall silent, and should take the lead again only when the Strategist has informed the King, after the complete defeat of the enemy, that his task has been fulfilled.³⁸

Although Moltke differed from Clausewitz on the political control of warfare,³⁹ he did accept Clausewitz’s idea of *Vernichtungskrieg*, the complete annihilation of the enemy’s ability to continue the fight. And in Moltke’s view, until that point had been reached, the political class was to stand down. Moltke felt that only by finishing the task given to the military would the political class then be able to properly complete its tasks. Interference in military affairs would result in failure all around.⁴⁰

Otto von Bismarck’s views stood in stark opposition to most of those of Moltke. He felt that warfare should be continuously under the control of policymakers in order to finesse its use, squeezing out any possible gain in the political realm. As a further insult to Bismarck’s pride and authority, Moltke felt that while war was ongoing, that he should be the lone counsel to the

³⁷ Clausewitz, *On War*, 87. Also see Michael Eliot Howard, *Clausewitz: On War* (Washington: Library of Congress, 1997) 17-18.

³⁸ Quoted in Howard, “The Influence of Clausewitz,” 31.

³⁹ Clausewitz thought it ‘absurd’ that war-making might be free of political control. See Roth, “Field Marshal von Moltke the Elder,” 2.

⁴⁰ See histories of recent U.S. involvement in Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, etc.

kaiser.⁴¹ This disagreement over the role of the political during warfare led to an antipathetic, adversarial relationship between the two German leaders.⁴²

Two other concepts of German warfare should be mentioned. They are *die Einkreisung* and *der Bewegungskrieg* (encirclement and movement warfare). These related tactics are not new concepts overall. They have been important militarily from ancient times, famously at Thermopylae in 480 BC and at Cannae in 216 BC, but they obtained somewhat mystical status in modern Germany. *Die Einkreisung* has significance both military and political. The military concept became a hallmark of the modern German war machine in combination with *der Bewegungskrieg*.⁴³ Politically, the term *die Einkreisung* referred to the geographic position of Germany between two antagonists, France and Russia, and exposed constantly to the possibility of *Zweifrontenkrieg* (a two-front war).

Another problem with which the military planners in the German Empire had to contend was a Gordian Knot for which no one possessed the sword of Alexander. There was constant conflict between those wishing to increase the size of army and those resistant to that action, concerned that lower socioeconomic classes, as well as politically unreliable persons, might be enlisted.

The *Großer Generalstab* continually advocated for increased numbers. Its work with war plans convinced it that Germany's central European location necessitated a much larger army than it concurrently possessed in order to contend with the huge armies of its neighbors. To wit,

⁴¹ Roth, "Field Marshal von Moltke the Elder," 6.

⁴² Roth, "Field Marshal von Moltke the Elder," 1.

⁴³ Movement warfare, *Bewegungskrieg*, was later branded as *Blitzkrieg* by the non-German press. It was a term which was never adopted by the German military. See Heinz Guderian, *Achtung-Panzer: The Development of Armoured Forces, their Tactics and Operational Potential* (London: Brockhampton Press, 1999. Originally published 1936.), 16.

Germany in the 1890s was fifty percent larger in population than France yet fielded a smaller army.⁴⁴

On the other hand, the *Preussisches Kriegsministerium* (Prussian War Ministry) insisted on quality over quantity. The *Deutsches Reichsheer* (German Imperial Army) was of Prussian origin and it had remained primarily Prussian since the Wars of Unification. It was a consistent Prussian fear that an expansion of the army would dilute the Prussian influence with a flood of lower-class recruits and require the acceptance of greater numbers of middle-class bourgeoisie and non-Prussian officers into the ranks of the officers' corps. This rankled the socially exclusive Prussian officers, many of noble birth, who were concerned that officerial *esprit de corps* might be compromised. More importantly, there was great concern that the army would be exposed to infiltration by socialist sympathizers. The Prussian elites were more concerned with any vitiative subversion than they were about total numbers of soldiers, thinking that the presence of socialists would weaken the army more than would possibly inadequate numbers.⁴⁵

It may seem counterintuitive, but the German left, particularly the Socialist party, favored increased army recruitment and even universal conscription or, *comme les socialistes français* after Sedan, a *levée en masse*. The reasoning was that an army populated with the common man was more accountable to the general public than an army consisting primarily of elite, mostly Prussian, officers and a select group of conscripts.⁴⁶ This was exactly what the government, especially the Prussian officer corps, was trying to avoid.

⁴⁴ Oliver Stein, "Pre-war Military Planning (Germany)," 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel et al., Freie Universität Berlin, last modified 3 Mar 2021, DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.11515.

⁴⁵ Mark Hewitson, *Germany and the Causes of the First World War* (Oxford, UK: Berg, 2004), 8, 127, and Volker R. Berghahn, "Origins," in *The Cambridge History of the First World War*, Vol. 1, *Global War*, ed. Jay Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 30.

⁴⁶ Hewitson, *Germany and the Causes*, 89.

Yet another concern was that reserve troops who were not full-time soldiers would reduce the efficacy of regular troops.⁴⁷ The Prussian Ministry felt that well-trained, full-time professional soldiers could fulfill any needed task. The General Staff, in charge of actual war planning, felt it needed greater reserves of discharged former soldiers to back up the frontline units.⁴⁸

Although it was already a significant problem in the early years of the Empire, the quality/quantity conundrum would be ever more important in the last few years leading up to the Great War.⁴⁹ The divergence of opinion on this subject was the direct result of the divergence of structure and command in the upper echelons of the *Reichsheer*.

Strangely, the *Großer Generalstab* and the *Preussisches Kriegsministerium*, both of vast power, were parallel groups in a bifurcated chain of command, not only independent of, but frequently critical of and at loggerheads with each other.⁵⁰

The Prussian War Ministry, actually an administrative agency of the army and, for all intents and purposes, another arm of the political leadership,

was responsible for the organization of military personnel, the procurement of weapons and equipment, and for payment and pensions. The minister of war was neither involved in the army's war planning process nor did he...exercise any command over German troops.⁵¹

The German General Staff, on the other hand, was tasked with making war plans and commanding the military during times of conflict. When the nation was at peace, the General

⁴⁷ Stein, "Pre-war Military Planning (Germany)."

⁴⁸ This quality-over-quantity thinking is reminiscent of the theories of past U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and his emphasis on reduced troop levels and small units of highly trained soldiers. It is the opinion of the author that Rumsfeld's theories were misguided and led to a much longer slog in Iraq and Afghanistan than should have occurred. There are no substitutes for the proverbial 'boots on the ground.'

⁴⁹ See below the discussion of universal conscription in 1912.

⁵⁰ Hull, *Absolute Destruction*, 107.

⁵¹ Markus Pöhlmann, "Prussian War Ministry," 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. Ute Daniel et al., Freie Universität Berlin, last modified 10 March 2016, DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.10856.

Staff “occupied the weakest position within the military decision-making hierarchy and thus had little influence on the organization of the army.”⁵² It had to plan military strategy and then hope the War Ministry would supply it with the needed personnel and equipment. One can see that the presence of differing goals would make for a contentious relationship under this system.

The political leaders were loath to abide any interference from the *Großer Generalstab* during peacetime. But, by allowing it to formulate war plans, the leaders basically gave the General Staff *carte blanche* to greatly influence political affairs when conflict arose. This is what occurred with the development of the so-called Schlieffen Plan.

As discussed in the first chapter, there have been a large number of scholars who charge the *Kaiserreich* with the greater part of the blame for the First World War. The Schlieffen Plan is the hook upon which many of these persons hang their hats. This plan is cited repeatedly as the impetus for Germany to initiate hostilities. That is not actually how things transpired in July and August of 1914, but the *Julikrisis* is not the focus of this paper. This paper will consider the Schlieffen Plan as part of an overall military mindset of the pre-First World War era often called the Cult of the Offensive.⁵³ It will consider whether the approach of the German Empire was atypical as compared to its neighboring states and whether the actions and practices of Germany were especially provocative.

The Cult of the Offensive, an emphasis obviously on offensive military action, manifested itself in many forms in essentially all the great European powers of the time. Strengthened defensive fortifications *were* part of the military improvements implemented, but

⁵² Stein, “Pre-war Military Planning (Germany).”

⁵³ The general obsession of the whole of Europe with the military offensive has been targeted as “a principal cause of the First World War, creating or magnifying many of the dangers which historians blame for causing the July crisis.” See Stephen Van Evera, “The Cult of the Offensive and the Origins of the First World War,” *International Security* 9, no. 1 (1984): 58.

they were much less emphasized than the production of larger and more powerful weaponry, especially artillery. Military planners had been impressed with the ability of heavy artillery to destroy masonry and concrete fortifications in such conflicts as the 1904-05 Russo-Japanese War. As a result, they had almost universally become drawn to the opinion that no defensive works could withstand the might of a potent, motivated offensive. In addition, great importance was placed on rapid offensive movement.⁵⁴ In Germany, this was the concept of *Bewegungskrieg* (movement warfare) that eventually played such an important role in the Second World War Wehrmacht. The great powers “increasingly believed that attackers would hold the advantage on the battlefield, and that wars would (therefore) be short and decisive.”⁵⁵ They showed little “apprehension about the grave consequences of war.”⁵⁶ As a result, little planning was done in Germany for an extended *Langer Kampf* and there was great reluctance to ask the private economy to prepare either.⁵⁷

This idea of a Short War was an illusion with many fathers. Most officials simply assumed, ignoring writers such as Jan Bloch (see Chapter Three), that any future wars would be similar to previous ones. The war planners did listen to Heinrich von Treitschke, though (see Chapter Two), who saw in the dreadfully powerful new technology wars that would “become rarer and shorter, owing to man’s natural horror of bloodshed as well as to the size and quality of

⁵⁴ John Keegan, *The First World War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 20.

⁵⁵ Keegan, *The First World War*, 20.

⁵⁶ Ian Kershaw, *To Hell and Back: Europe 1914-1949* (New York: Penguin Books, 2015), 37.

⁵⁷ Martin Horn, “Economic Planning Before 1914,” 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. Ute Daniel et al., Freie Universität Berlin, last modified 8 Oct 2014, DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.10372. Hitler’s Third Reich repeated this mistake of not properly preparing and enlisting the economy before the Second World War with even more dire consequences.

modern armies.”⁵⁸ But, most importantly, the Short War Illusion was birthed by the Cult of the Offensive.⁵⁹

Not all were convinced, though, of the power of the offensive to produce a short war. In fact, during the early years of the empire, the time of Bismarck’s ‘satisfied’ Germany, the elder Moltke had already deduced that, due to great improvements in fortifications, arms, and rail movement of troops, the defensive had assumed the position of advantage compared to the offensive. This thinking added to Moltke’s concern over the development of a *Volkskrieg* and hearkened back to Clausewitz who had warned that the defensive is the strongest form of battle, and that the offensive, as it progresses, loses its power.⁶⁰ Throughout Moltke’s tenure, as the development of new weaponry, including machine guns and advanced artillery continued, others also began to realize the difficulty of attacking against heavy infantry and fortified emplacements but this concern remained a minority position.

Schlieffen disparaged the suggestion, writing in 1893 that ‘the defensive idea occupies much more space in men’s hearts than seems desirable.’⁶¹

A prominent member of the German General Staff, General Hermann von Kuhl, in supporting an emphasis on the offensive doctrine, said, “The defensive is merely frontal

⁵⁸ Treitschke, *Politics*, Vol. 1, 70. In Vol. 2, Treitschke allowed that these ‘rarer and shorter’ wars would also be more ‘sanguinary.’ See Heinrich von. Treitschke, *Politics*, Vol. 2, trans. Blanche Dugdale and Torben De Bille (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1916. Originally published in Germany in 1897), 443. Also see Alan Sked, “Belle Époque: Europe before 1914,” in *The Oxford Handbook of European History, 1914-1945*, ed. Nicholas Doumanis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 27, and John Mueller, “Changing Attitudes Towards War: The Impact of the First World War,” *British Journal of Political Science* 21, no. 1 (1991): 15.

⁵⁹ Max Hastings consider the so-called ‘Short War Illusion’ to be a myth. See Max Hastings, *Catastrophe 1914: Europe Goes to War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013), 110-11.

⁶⁰ Clausewitz, *On War*, 84, 527.

⁶¹ Hewitson, *Germany and the Causes*, 124.

resistance and cannot annihilate the adversary. Annihilation can only be achieved by movement, not immobility.”⁶²

If one were to assume that the cult of the offensive was a purely German phenomenon, one would be in error. A French soldier and theorist who early on advanced the idea of the offensive was Ardant du Picq in his *Études sur le Combat (Battle Studies)*, published posthumously in 1880.⁶³ The French thereafter went all in on offensive measures,⁶⁴ designing their strategy of *attaque brusque* (a quick or sudden attack) which featured their newest models of machine guns. They were particularly excited about the offensive capability of these weapons.⁶⁵ In 1912, the president of France, Clément Armand Fallières, held forth that “the offensive alone is suited to the temperament of French soldiers... We are determined to march straight against the enemy without hesitation.”⁶⁶ Joseph Joffre, the Chief of the French General staff, announced that the French army “no longer knows any other law than the offensive... Any other conception ought to be rejected as contrary to the very nature of war.”⁶⁷ The 1913 edition of the French Army Regulations stated that the main doctrine of the army was to be nothing but offense.⁶⁸ The idea that the spirit of *cran* (grit) could surmount defensive firepower was pervasive throughout the French *corps d'officiers*. The *attaque à outrance*, an all-out assault,

⁶² Quoted in Jack Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive: Military Decision Making and the Disasters of 1914* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 144.

⁶³ See Ardant Du Picq, *Battle Studies: Ancient and Modern Battle*, trans. John N. Greely and Robert C. Cotton (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1921).

⁶⁴ British soldier and military theorist/historian B.H. Liddell Hart described the French as “obsessed with the virtues of the offensive.” See B.H. Liddell Hart, *Through the Fog of War* (New York: Random House, 1938), 57.

⁶⁵ Volker R. Berghahn, *Europe in the Era of Two World Wars: From Militarism and Genocide to Civil Society, 1900-1950* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2006), 31. The French seemed to rather have forgotten that machine guns are also extremely useful in *defensive* operations. This is a lesson they would learn many times over at places like the Marne and Verdun.

⁶⁶ Barbara Tuchman, *The Guns of August* (New York: Dell, 1962), 51. One might also note that Président Fallières would not be the one required to “march straight against the enemy without hesitation.”

⁶⁷ Van Evera, “The Cult of the Offensive,” 60.

⁶⁸ Hastings, *Catastrophe 1914*, 33.

became the most acclaimed mode of combat. This type of offensive was seen repeatedly during the First World War and was a primary cause of mass casualties.⁶⁹

The British were likewise climbing aboard the offensive bandwagon. This is despite an awareness of impressive defensive effectiveness at battles like the 1879 Rorke's Drift engagement during the Zulu Wars. In that instance, only about 150 British soldiers successfully defended their station against 3000-4000 swarming Zulu warriors who, in wave after wave, threw themselves at the British perimeter only to be driven back with massive casualties.⁷⁰ The Boer War provided further examples of the strength of the defensive, but in 1912 the British General W.G. Knox wrote, "The defensive is never an acceptable role to the Briton, and he makes little or no study of it." General R.C.B. Haking argued in 1913 that the offensive "will win as sure as there is a sun in the heavens."⁷¹

Like all the others, Russia too developed extensive offensive plans. Mindful of the geography of its Polish salient which abutted Austria-Hungary on the south and Germany on the west and north, the Russians had decided in 1900 to initiate concurrent attacks against the Austro-Hungarians in Galicia and on the Germans in East Prussia in the event of war.⁷²

In the fever for offense, war planners conveniently ignored many excellent examples of modern wars that were far from 'short and decisive.' Conflicts such as the American War of Secession and the more-recent Russo-Japanese War had

⁶⁹ Hastings, *Catastrophe 1914*, 160. Also see page 321 where Hastings quotes the French general Maurice Gamelin as saying, "The idea of organising any kind of defence aroused an almost innate repugnance; digging into the earth was believed to be a dishonourable gesture for loyal fighters who in their heart of hearts wanted to offer themselves up to danger with their chests exposed."

⁷⁰ Victor Davis Hanson, *Carnage and Culture: Landmark Battles in the Rise to Western Power* (New York: Anchor Books, 2007), 279-333.

⁷¹ T.H.E. Travers, "Technology, Tactics, and Morale: Jean De Bloch, the Boer War, and British Military Theory, 1900-1914," *The Journal of Modern History* 51, no. 2 (1979): 271, 275.

⁷² Hastings, *Catastrophe 1914*, 32, and Frank McDonough, *The Origins of the First and Second World Wars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 10.

demonstrated the power of the new defensive technologies... (But) Europeans embraced a set of political and military myths which obscured both the defender's advantages and the obstacles an aggressor would confront. This mindset helped to mold the offensive military doctrines which *every European power adopted* during the period 1892- 1913.⁷³ (My italic emphasis)

In actual practice, these examples which should have deterred war provided a perverse impetus. The war planners had drawn a fiendishly distorted lesson from these case studies that, even in the face of great casualties, the absolutely devastating power of modern warfare would shorten a war, limiting the cumulative damage to lives and property.⁷⁴ Another less obvious reason for the fixation in all of the European countries on a powerful offense in order to quickly end a war was the real and constant threat of socialist revolution at home while the military was otherwise encumbered.⁷⁵

A palpable expression of the idea of the insuperability of the offensive was the development of the plans for rapid deployment. All countries had plans of this variety such as the French Plan XVII, the Russian Plans G and A, and the aforementioned German Schlieffen Plan.⁷⁶

It is important to understand what the Schlieffen Plan was and what it was not. It is also important to understand why the Schlieffen Plan was written and how complete it was. One must consider whether it was even an authentic plan for the military in an actual conflict. And, also for the purposes of this paper, it is important to determine what the Schlieffen Plan means for the culpability of the German Empire as to the instigation of the First World War.

According to the commonly accepted historical version of Great War history, the Schlieffen Plan was developed over the two decades prior to the war and fully molded in a 1905

⁷³ Van Evera, "The Cult of the Offensive," 59.

⁷⁴ Kershaw, *To Hell and Back*, 37-38.

⁷⁵ Hewitson, *Germany and the Causes*, 8.

⁷⁶ Hastings, *Catastrophe 1914*, 32.

Denkschrift (memorandum) by Chief of the General Staff Alfred von Schlieffen. It is said to have decreed a sweeping preventative war against the French with the bulk of the German army while using a lesser force in the east to keep the Russians at bay. Once the French had been destroyed in a *Vernichtungskrieg* (war of annihilation), German troops could be rerouted east to destroy the Russian army.⁷⁷ The Eastern Front with Russia was considered by the Germans to be the most decisive theater.⁷⁸ The war with the French would be a temporary battle, but it was in the east that the Germans believed the war would be won or lost.

Writing after the war in 1919, the historian Hans Delbrück was the first to broach the subject of the Schlieffen Plan. In his opinion, the German military had erred by implementing the wrong plan, that of Schlieffen, rather than the opposite approach envisioned by the elder Moltke. Moltke's ideas had been actually the opposite (attack in the east, defense in the west) of that identified as the Schlieffen Plan (attack in the west, defense in the east). Delbrück's commentary directly challenged the General Staff. General and historian Hermann von Kuhl wrote much during the postwar period concerning the war planning of the German military. He countered Delbrück, stating his belief that the younger Moltke had not properly understood the plan that Schlieffen had developed. A key point here is that these two commentators both accepted the existence of a written, agreed-upon plan that envisaged a two-front war.⁷⁹

Schlieffen's 1905 *Denkschrift* deserves much scrutiny. The question remains whether the memorandum was just an exercise, was meant as a genuine war plan, or was written primarily to bolster the army's request for additional troops. The memorandum was written in December

⁷⁷ Kershaw, *To Hell and Back*, 38.

⁷⁸ Cramer, "A World of Enemies," 293.

⁷⁹ Terence Zuber, "The Schlieffen Plan: Fantasy or Catastrophe?," *History Today* 52, no. 9 (September 2002): 40.

1905 at the end of Schlieffen's tenure as Chief of the General Staff to be given to Moltke the Younger who was succeeding him.

What became the Schlieffen Plan began percolating soon after the Franco-Prussian War. In the 1870s, after the surprisingly quick resurgence of French military power despite the recent devastation of the Franco-Prussian War, it "was agreed by the Great General Staff of the Imperial German Army that the outbreak of war should be followed by an immediate attack on France and a defensive attitude toward Russia." This was a précis of the 1905 Schlieffen Plan, although "in 1879, after the conclusion of the Dual Alliance with Austria, Moltke reversed the plan to an offensive against Russia and a defensive war against France."⁸⁰ This was the strategy Hans Delbrück felt should have been followed.

When Schlieffen became the head of the General Staff in 1891, he preserved Moltke's basic eastern offensive/western defensive plan in the beginning of his tenure. In a short time, though, he reversed course again back to the original plan of a western offensive/eastern defensive and begin to develop strategies and make specific arrangements based on that. This later formed the core of his 1905 *Denkschrift*.⁸¹

As a general outline, the Schlieffen Plan does seem to fit the definition of a war plan. But Schlieffen is only outlining what he believes to be the best and paramount way to launch an attack only against France. The eastern theatre of operations (Russia, Austria-Hungary, the Balkans) is not mentioned and no preparations or projections are expounded upon or elaborated for that theatre of operations. In his commentary, Schlieffen makes many assumptions and

⁸⁰ "The Schlieffen Plan, 1905," in *Documents of German History*, ed. Louis L. Snyder (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1958), 290-91.

⁸¹ "The Schlieffen Plan, 1905," in *Documents of German History*, 290-91.

presumptions. Reading the 1905 document gives one the sense that it was simply a strudel-in-the-sky exercise.⁸²

For example, Schlieffen did not limit his planning to the actual force levels present in Germany. His plans call for more divisions than were available in 1905, 1909, or even 1914. He simply “assumed the existence of as large a force as he needed to implement his ideal strategy.”⁸³

In Schlieffen’s world all goes according to plan: “It can be assumed that the Germans’ advance will not be impeded,” he states and also strangely posits that “France will probably restrict itself to defensive measures.”⁸⁴ This last statement was in sharp contrast to the growing cult of the offensive, of which the French, with their *attaque à outrance*, were keen devotees. Schlieffen neglects Clausewitz’s tenet that “defense is a stronger form of fighting than attack...the superiority of the defensive...is very great, far greater than it appears at first sight.”⁸⁵ Schlieffen did admit in his memorandum, though, that “an offensive war requires and consumes a great deal of strength, and that this strength diminishes just as that of the defenders increases.”⁸⁶

The likely reason that the December 1905 memorandum makes no mention of Russia was that in 1905 Russia’s military had just been dealt a severe blow in the war with the Japanese and it was subsequently preoccupied with putting down a major revolution against the tsarist regime. There are some who have considered whether the plan was a call to seize the opportunity to

⁸² Schlieffen’s plan may be read in full here: German History in Documents and Images, “The Schlieffen Plan (1905),” Wilhelmine Germany and the First World War (1890-1918), https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=796

⁸³ Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive*, 109.

⁸⁴ German History in Documents and Images, “The Schlieffen Plan (1905).”

⁸⁵ Clausewitz, *On War*, 84.

⁸⁶ German History in Documents and Images, “The Schlieffen Plan (1905).”

attack France in 1906 knowing that the Russians could not possibly respond.⁸⁷ The Schlieffen Plan seems to have been written at a specific time for a specific purpose.

In developing his plan for a possible attack against France, Schlieffen based the entirety of his strategy on a pinwheeling maneuver through parts of Belgium and the Netherlands to strike France from the north. When Moltke the Younger succeeded Schlieffen as the head of the *Großer Generalstab* in January 1906, he continued Schlieffen's line of thinking, but began to modify it over time. One great change was that Moltke, realizing that Schlieffen's given force projections were not feasible, "diminished the ratio of the right wing to the left from 7:1 to 3:1." In addition, Moltke completely ruled out any violation of Dutch territory and gave much more thought to the Lorraine sector and any French offensive that might originate from there.⁸⁸ He also altered the eastern theatre to a defensive stance by scrapping the *Großer Ostaufmarsch* (Great Eastern out-march or offensive deployment).

The effect of these changes, mostly made out of sight of the chancellor as were the majority of General Staff plans, appropriated political territory by creating a situation in which it was impossible to attack Russia without first attacking France.⁸⁹

Schlieffen's 1905 plan describes only a one-front war. Furthermore, it required an army 25% larger than the army Germany actually fielded. That fact alone tells strongly against the plan being more than an optimistic exercise. Moreover, Max Hastings makes the point that "Schlieffen's vision of a grand envelopment was incapable of fulfilment by an army dependent

⁸⁷ Matthew S. Seligmann, "Pre-war Military Planning," 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. Ute Daniel et al., Freie Universität Berlin, last modified 26 Jun 2019, DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.11375 and Gerhard Ritter, *The Schlieffen Plan: Critique of a Myth* (London: Oswald Wolff Limited, 1958), 17.

⁸⁸ Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive*, 111, and Christian Stachelbeck, "Moltke, Helmuth Johannes Ludwig von," 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. Ute Daniel et al., Freie Universität Berlin, last modified 06 April 2016, DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.10885

⁸⁹ Stein, "Pre-war Military Planning (Germany)."

for mobility on the feet of its men and the hooves of its horses.”⁹⁰ And Hastings disparages Schlieffen’s understanding of basic logistics, citing the fact that “the daily weight of supply necessary to support an army in the field had doubled even since 1870.”⁹¹

Amongst those who doubt the real existence of a ‘Schlieffen Plan’ is retired U.S. Army officer, military analyst, and historian Terence Zuber, who writes:

The concept was to deploy the entire German army in the west. No forces would be sent to protect East Prussia against the Russians. Seven-eighths of the German army was to be deployed between Metz and Aachen, on the right wing of the German front, leaving just one-eighth of the army to guard the left flank in Lorraine against a French attack. The right wing of the western army would sweep through Belgium and northern France, if necessary swinging to the west of Paris, continually turning the French left flank, eventually pushing the French army into Switzerland, while seeking a single great battle of annihilation.⁹²

It is Zuber’s analysis that the ‘Plan’ was nothing but a collection of notes and memoranda that laid out a theoretical vision or concept for his successor, the younger Moltke, to strive to bring to reality.⁹³ Zuber also believes that the ‘Plan’ was meant to serve as ammunition for an appeal to the Reichstag for a great increase in the size of the army “by establishing the rationale that Germany’s only hope for victory was through a massive battle of annihilation...the success of which depended on a substantial increase in troop strength.”⁹⁴

John Keegan disagrees. He believes that the Schlieffen plan was based on plans handed down from the elder Moltke and that Schlieffen modified those plans and tested his ideas repeatedly on staff rides and in war games. Keegan reports that Schlieffen’s blueprint was so

⁹⁰ Hastings, *Catastrophe 1914*, 304.

⁹¹ Hastings, *Catastrophe 1914*, 305. Hastings labels Schlieffen a “fantasist.”

⁹² Zuber, “The Schlieffen Plan: Fantasy or Catastrophe?,” 40.

⁹³ Zuber, “The Schlieffen Plan: Fantasy or Catastrophe?,” 41.

⁹⁴ Cramer, “A World of Enemies,” 294, and Zuber, “The Schlieffen Plan: Fantasy or Catastrophe?,” 45.

specific that the German army was scheduled to destroy the French army on the forty-second day post *M-Tag*, Mobilization Day.⁹⁵

Zuber is of the opinion that the Schlieffen Plan is more myth than reality.⁹⁶ He feels its existence as purported truth is employed for two very different reasons. One use is to uphold the reputation of the German General Staff by blaming the Great War defeat on leaders such as Moltke the younger who supposedly did not faithfully follow Schlieffen's unassailable plan. Another use is to impugn the Germans as dysfunctionally militaristically aggressive.⁹⁷

It seems obvious that Schlieffen's 1905 memorandum could not be the whole of any 'Schlieffen Plan.' It does not mention Russia, a two-front war, or seeking to avoid the elder Moltke's *Volkskrieg*-type war of attrition and is based on the need for far more troops than existed in the German army. The General Staff under the younger Moltke did develop an offensive operational plan to confront the problems of a two-front war (*Zweifrontenkrieg*) and the degeneration of a conflict into a lengthy war of attrition.⁹⁸ But even this new Moltke-flavored Schlieffen Plan "required eight army corps (about sixteen divisions) more than the War Ministry had provided by 1914."⁹⁹

And yet Moltke remained committed to the basic plan, assuring the Austrian Chief of General Staff Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf in 1909 that Germany would defeat France within three or four weeks in the event of a war.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁵ Keegan, *The First World War*, 28-31.

⁹⁶ Cramer, "A World of Enemies," 293. Also see Terence Zuber, *Inventing the Schlieffen Plan: German War Planning, 1871-1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). Also see Seligmann, "Pre-war Military Planning," in which he states that Zuber thinks that "no serious military planner would devise a scheme requiring assets that were fictitious." Max Hastings also denies the existence of a "precisely ordered 'Schlieffen Plan,'" and instead thinks it "more appropriate to speak of an indisputable 'Schlieffen concept.'" See Hastings, *Catastrophe 1914*, 160.

⁹⁷ Zuber, "The Schlieffen Plan: Fantasy or Catastrophe?," 41, and Terence Zuber, "The 'Schlieffen Plan' and German War Guilt," *War in History* 14, no. 1 (2007): 96-98, 107-108.

⁹⁸ Vego, "Clausewitz's *Schwerpunkt*," 102.

⁹⁹ Hull, *Absolute Destruction*, 107-08.

¹⁰⁰ Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive*, 114.

Of interest is that in 1871 after the protracted finish to the Franco-Prussian War, the elder Moltke had already dismissed what became the core of Schlieffen's planning. He wrote in April of that year that "in the event of a two-front war, 'we cannot hope to rid ourselves of one enemy through a quick, successful offensive in the West, and then turn against the other foe. We have just learned how hard it is to bring even the victorious struggle against France to an end.'"¹⁰¹

Moltke's updated plan was developed with consideration of surprise as a crucial element in the success of an attack. Preparation was thus of great importance. Train timetables must be scheduled precisely to carry the necessary enormous numbers of troops that would be needed quickly to the front. Once there, these troops must be rapidly committed to battle.¹⁰²

All of this took a great amount of planning.

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, military planning made a fundamental change. Previously, planning had been spontaneous and with respect only to a particular situation. Plans were not made until the war began and the battle was joined. These were material, concrete plans made for the immediate future for specific circumstances. After the Wars of Unification, though, German military planning took on different qualities – those of the abstract, of the hypothetical and of the speculative. Plans were designed, diagrammed, and charted for multiple possible exigencies. They were written out in detail and stored away. In this way, a blueprint for action was close at hand if and when the hypothetical became the actual.¹⁰³

Development of the rail system helped spur this preset planning. Military officials realized early on that the railway would be especially useful for moving troops at speeds far beyond what had been obtainable in the past, in the age of long marches and horse-drawn

¹⁰¹ Helmut von Moltke, quoted in Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive*, 129.

¹⁰² Berghahn, *Europe in the Era of Two World Wars*, 31.

¹⁰³ Keegan, *The First World War*, 24.

wagons. These officials also realized that timetables would have to be developed in order to make efficient use of the railways. It would also be necessary to plan extensively for supply and logistics for these rapidly moving troops. And, as the railway system grew and changed, these plans would have to be constantly amended.¹⁰⁴

Planning is a skill that must be learned. Prussian army staff schools had led the way in the production of professional officers in the nineteenth century and now quickly took to the task of producing officers adept at planning for future contingencies.¹⁰⁵

The inherent problem with such rigid time-tabling is that it is like a Rube Goldberg machine. Once the apparatus is activated, it is nearly impossible to bring it to a halt. The mobilization plan of Germany discussed above (the so-called Schlieffen Plan) is the most widely known of these preconceived blueprints, but each of the major European militaries had produced in-depth, far-reaching, and generally inflexible plans (Russian Plans G and A, French Plan XVII).¹⁰⁶

The effects of war-by-timetable were felt across the whole of the European continent. From the day of mobilization, strict timetables were set out to determine when certain troops or supplies would be moved and to where. One step depended on the one before and cued up the one after it. Rigidity was built into the system and trying to stop it would be like trying to stop one of the freight trains it ordered about.

The constant revision and modification of the maps, tables, and charts inculcated a sense of a plan's soundness, rationality, and infallibility in military planners. This produced a kind of hubris and imprudence, and it produced a desire to see the plan in action. All of this created a

¹⁰⁴ Keegan, *The First World War*, 25.

¹⁰⁵ Keegan, *The First World War*, 25.

¹⁰⁶ Keegan, *The First World War*, 25, 27-29.

sense of the *inevitability* of war. This inevitability, within an atmosphere gravid with the teachings of Treitschke and Bernhardi, often was understood and apprehended more as a *certainty* of war. But however the sense of future war was perceived, it encompassed not only defensive war, but pre-emptive war as well.

Today pre-emptive war is generally looked upon with great disapprobation. Prior to the era of the First World War this was not the case. Each of the major European powers was constantly on watch for a pre-emptive strike against it by another country, even from a nation with which it had seemingly stable relations. It was also on watch for an opportunity to strike another before that other might strike it first. An interesting illustration of this mindset is that whereas today all countries have ministries of defense, at that time all had ministries of war.

This brings to mind the famous Latin dictum, *si vis pacem, para bellum* (If you want peace, prepare for war.) All of Europe at this time was preparing for war. But it was not preparing *in case* of war; it was preparing *for* war. War was felt to be inevitable.

Other factors fed this belief in the inevitability of war:

- 1) The common assumption that every move by a nation was a move towards war.
- 2) The buildup of militaries, often tit-for-tat in arms and naval races.
- 3) The thinking that a country should try to be the first to make a move, not react to another's movements.
- 4) When mobilizations occurred, there was a reluctance to stand down.
- 5) As more money was spent on the military, politicians and the public wanted to see their investment used.
- 6) The emphasis on offensive military tactics, not defensive ones.
- 7) The development of the alliance system.
- 8) Defenses were thought not able to withstand offensive military action.¹⁰⁷

This sense of the inevitability of war was the primary focus of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European diplomacy. As noted above, this time was one of great change and

¹⁰⁷ Hastings, *Catastrophe 1914*, 3. Also see Wolfgang J. Mommsen, "The Topos of Inevitable War in Germany in the Decade Before 1914," in *Germany in the Age of Total War*, ed. Volker Berghahn and Martin Kitchen (London: Croom Helm, 1981), 23-45.

instability. The diplomatic world, though, was one area where some sense of stability still existed.

The domain of the *Fin de Siècle* diplomat was one of the old school. It was certainly *vieux jeu* but, because of this, it was steady and consistent. Diplomacy of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was not a science studied at university, but an art learned from the masters of the craft at embassies and diplomatic outposts. The ambassadorial class was an international socially-intimate group. It was a world in which nepotism was not uncommon, and actually encouraged. French, the internationally recognized language of diplomacy, was spoken with one's diplomatic cohorts, other members of the 'club,' no matter the country from which one hailed. Although these diplomats were obviously dedicated to their own nation's interests, they were all also dedicated to maintaining, as much as possible, the Concert of Europe. They all shared a common goal of avoiding, or at least attenuating, destructive military conflict. Overall, this system was quite effective. The diplomats knew they could trust their counterparts to be honest and also discreet.¹⁰⁸

One notable entity cultivated within the cultured halls of European diplomacy was the immensely important system of alliances between the great powers.

The alliance system was not new to Europe in the decades prior to the First World War. Transnational European alliances have existed since the first development of the nation-state concept which was firmly established especially after the Thirty Years War.¹⁰⁹

An oddity that often characterizes systems of alliance is that one alliance made by a country may act in direct opposition to another alliance made by that same country. This will be

¹⁰⁸ Keegan, *The First World War*, 26.

¹⁰⁹ Edit Bregu, "The Causes of the Balkan Wars 1912-1913 and Their Impact on the International Relations on the Eve of the First World War," *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences* 4, no. 9 (October 2013): 116.

noted below as specific instances and crises are discussed. In addition, some alliances may be widely known and acknowledged, whereas other alliances are made and maintained in secret. In the case of pre-First World War Europe, some of these covert alliances were not even known to all parts of the governments involved. It was for all these reasons that a nation in an alliance could never be completely sure that, when the chips were down, its presumed allies would act in support of it.¹¹⁰ As a result, there was more than a *soupçon* of unpredictability and volatility in the realm of European transnational relations.

Overall, though, the outward orderliness of the system of alliances and coalitions did provide a certain sense of security in pre-war Europe. Unfortunately, this feeling of security is widely considered an important factor in encouraging brinkmanship during crises. But it also must be considered whether instead it was “the uncertainty of the alliances’ cohesion in the face of a *casus foederis* that fostered a preference for high-risk crisis management among decision-makers.”¹¹¹ Both understandings seem to have been operative at various junctures.

After the Napoleonic Wars, the Concert of Europe was instituted and was relatively successful in maintaining a tolerable peace. The Concert of Europe was a semi-formal establishment of a balance of power among the states of Europe. Representatives of the Great Powers of Europe met in Vienna in 1814-15, hosted by then Foreign Minister, later Chancellor, of Austria, Prince Klemens von Metternich. This meeting, the Congress of Vienna, worked

to establish a system of international relations, a ‘concert,’ wherein the states of Europe, in spite of their many differences and rivalries, could work together to ensure revolutionary forces were kept in check...and based on an understanding

¹¹⁰ Günther Kronenbitter, “Alliance System 1914,” 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. Ute Daniel et al., Freie Universität Berlin, last modified 15 Aug 2019, DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.11398.

¹¹¹ Kronenbitter, “Alliance System 1914.”

that their mutual interests outweighed their various economic and political rivalries.¹¹²

The Concert of Europe was, in practice, quite successful. There were setbacks along the way – the Crimean War, the Schleswig Wars, the Austro-Prussian War, and the Franco-Prussian War among them – but these conflicts were modest in size. During the early part of the Concert, some transient alliances were made, but after the German Wars of Unification, alliance-building took on a vastly greater importance. The era of the *Kabinettskrieg*, the cabinet war, was coming to a close and the era had begun in which Moltke's disquieting conception of the *Volkskrieg*, the peoples' war, would regularly be realized.

The creation of a unified German state critically altered the European geopolitical landscape and environs. As Germany grew in population and in geopolitical and economic power, other European countries, which had been accustomed to a fragmented and non-organized territory of German states, began to feel great unease.¹¹³ Their foreign policy stances and actions revealed this nervous apprehension as many European states initiated alliances and agreements directed at fencing in Germany. Prussia had been threat enough, especially to France and Russia, but a unified Germany was another matter altogether. After the quick and decisive 1870 defeat of the Second French Empire in the Franco-Prussian War and the completion of German unification which that begat, France and Russia became decidedly fearful of the emergence of a rising German state and actively sought to thwart its ascendance as a European power.

This is an important point. Germany, due to its geographic position, had a fear of encirclement. France and Russia in particular made that fear a reality, obliging the Germans to

¹¹² John Paul Newman, "Nationalism," 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. Ute Daniel et al., Freie Universität Berlin, last modified 8 Oct 2014, DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.10222. Also see Bregu, "The Causes of the Balkan Wars," 115-16.

¹¹³ McDonough, *The Origins of the First and Second World Wars*, 3.

develop a plan to break out of that encirclement if it became necessary. This is one way the actions of France and Russia made a future war more likely. Another was Russia's continual meddling in the Balkans. Therefore, as the disordered center of *Mitteleuropa* became organized, two basic currents swept over every conflict. Those two currents were "enmity between France and Germany and the growing animosity between the Austro-Hungarian and Russian."¹¹⁴

In addition to German unification, other concurrent events were roiling the waters as well. Particularly important was the slow-motion collapse of the Ottoman Empire, with many local states attempting to elbow their way in to feed off that decaying imperial carcass. This could only further destabilize southeastern Europe, a chronically volatile area, and it did.

After the Franco-Prussian War, Bismarck had stressed that because Germany was now unified, it had all that it needed. He pronounced Germany a 'satisfied' power. War, though, had been the avenue employed to unite the German states. Therefore, it would not be unreasonable for neighboring countries to worry that Germany would approach every geopolitical challenge by way of armed conflict. Because of this, Bismarck made a great effort to calm the concern and trepidation of Germany's neighbors. Thenceforth, Bismarck stressed that the task of the German nation was to focus on improving the domestic environment of the empire, not acquiring any further territories.¹¹⁵ Understanding the cost of war to a nation and its effects on international relations, he repeatedly counselled against further warfare. This was in direct opposition to the elder Moltke who felt the sword would still have some use for Germany.¹¹⁶ But Bismarck recognized that incorporating the new German Empire into the fragile, precarious, and araneose

¹¹⁴ Bregu, "The Causes of the Balkan Wars," 116. At the root of the Russia/Austria-Hungary animosity was the question of the Balkans and the Pan-Slavic agitation which festered there

¹¹⁵ McDonough, *The Origins of the First and Second World Wars*, 4, Hamerow, ed., *The Age of Bismarck*, 142.

¹¹⁶ Roth, "Field Marshal von Moltke the Elder," 2. Moltke would change his tune over the next two decades. After his retirement, he "argued that Europe's fate should thenceforth be decided diplomatically rather than on the battlefield: he thought the usefulness of war to Germany was exhausted." See Hastings, *Catastrophe 1914*, 27.

European international political system would be fraught with difficulty. He pledged to avoid any action without first considering the ramifications of that action. This was an essential determinant of his foreign policy.¹¹⁷

The primary goal of Bismarckian policy was the isolation and containment of France, Germany's so-called 'hereditary enemy.'¹¹⁸ This was laid out in the *Kissinger Diktat* which will be discussed below. France had restructured her army surprisingly quickly in the wake of the Franco-Prussian War. Bismarck was concerned that a rearmed France might wish to act on the idea of *revanche*, to avenge its loss in the war and retake the territory of Alsace-Lorraine. Incidentally, Bismarck had resisted annexing Alsace-Lorraine fearing the future political trouble that would arise. He only agreed to insist on the annexation in treaty negotiations with the French after the "General Staff declared Metz indispensable to the defence of Germany's western frontier."¹¹⁹

One important aspect of Bismarck's plan to isolate the French was preventing a Franco-Russia accord. French envoys had begun to explore a cooperative relationship with the Russians immediately after the Franco-Prussian War. Bismarck aimed to prevent a Franco-Russian agreement by tying Russia to Germany. He did this through a meeting of the three European emperors – Wilhelm I of Germany, Alexander II of Russia, and Franz Joseph of Austria – in the fall of 1872. The agreement was finalized in 1873 as the *Dreikaiserbund* or League of the Three Emperors.¹²⁰ Nothing of great substance was accomplished through this agreement, but that was

¹¹⁷ Roth, "Field Marshal von Moltke the Elder," 4.

¹¹⁸ As to the term 'hereditary enemy,' see Cramer, "A World of Enemies," 282-83.

¹¹⁹ Ritter, *The Schlieffen Plan: Critique of a Myth*, 39. Also see Gustave Le Bon, *The Psychology of the Great War* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1916), 156.

¹²⁰ Bernd Ulrich, "Foreign Policy and Imperialism," *The German Imperium*, Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung (Federal Center for Civic Education), 27 September 2012, accessed 27 Dec 2023, <https://www.bpb.de/themen/kolonialismus-imperialismus/kaiserreich/139653/aussenpolitik-und-imperialismus/>, and "The Three Emperors' Conferences, 1872-1873," in *Documents of German History*, ed. Louis L. Snyder (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1958), 232-34

not the point. The point was to cement the comradery felt by these absolutist monarchs as opposed to consideration of pursuing a relationship with the republican nation-state of France.

Once the *Dreikaiserbund* had been established, Bismarck felt he could continue to push France into further isolation. Allegations that France was preparing for a war of revanchism were published by the *Berliner Post* in a 9 April 1875 piece entitled “*Krieg-in-Sicht?*” (“War in Sight?”). This editorial was likely encouraged by Bismarck in an effort to alarm the French, causing them to back off on their rearmament efforts to prove they had no plans for war.¹²¹ It had no such effect.

Bismarck had had no intention of going to war. This was a bluff and a test of the stances of the other major powers. Moltke did take the opportunity to call for a preventative war against France to halt the rearming of its army, but Bismarck rebuffed him.¹²² The British and the Russians made it clear that they would stand behind the French if the situation came to war. This was a vitally important revelation. It was now apparent that a future conflict with France would become a conflict with others also. This translated into the realization of the necessity to prepare and plan for a *Zweifrontenkrieg*, a two-front war.

In spite of the ploy, the French continued to rearm and Bismarck had learned that using the spectre of war to influence foreign policy was no longer a viable option in the new Europe. He was accepting of that and thereafter employed a more cautious and less provocative approach.¹²³ He would also soon realize that the *Dreikaiserbund* had been made weaker by the

¹²¹ Raymond Cohen, “Threat Perception in International Crisis,” *Political Science Quarterly* 93, no. 1 (1978): 93; Ulrich, “Foreign Policy and Imperialism;” and Imanuel Geiss, *German Foreign Policy, 1871-1914* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976), 28-29. Also see James Stone, “The War Scare of 1875 Revisited,” *Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen* 53, no. 2 (1994): 309-26.

¹²² Stein, “Pre-war Military Planning (Germany).”

¹²³ Abrams, *Bismarck, and the German Empire*, 23, “Foreign and Alliance Policy: 1871-1890,” Otto-von-Bismarck-Stiftung, and Ulrich, “Foreign Policy and Imperialism.”

‘*Krieg-in-Sicht?*’ experiment. This would become apparent within a couple of years when hostilities flared between the Russians and the Ottoman Empire.

In the *Kissinger Diktak* (Kissingen Dictation) of 15 June 1877, Bismarck detailed his foreign policy in a letter to the secretary for foreign affairs, Bernhard Ernst von Bülow. This letter was dictated to his son Herbert while in the spa town of Bad Kissingen, hence the name. In the document, Bismarck discusses ‘*le cauchemar des coalitions*’ (the nightmare of coalitions) with which he must contend. He lays out the national alliances and possibilities of alliances in a seemingly wishful, almost dreamlike, way. This thinking was the foundation for his eventual system of alliances that included the Dual Alliance, the Reinsurance Treaty, and the Triple Alliance. In his concluding thoughts, Bismarck again asserts that he wishes for no more territory, but for “a general political situation in which all powers except France need us, and are prevented as far as possible from forming coalitions against us by virtue of their relations to one another.”¹²⁴

The Russo-Turkish War had begun a couple of months earlier in April 1877 as the latest episode of a continuing crisis in the Balkan and Caucasus territories of the Ottoman Empire. Beginning in 1875, rebellions against Ottoman rule had repeatedly broken out across southeastern Europe, ignited by higher taxes imposed as a result of the 1873 economic panic. By 1876, Bulgaria was in full revolt and Russia entered the fray the next year in support of it and to protect the Christian populations of the Balkans.¹²⁵

¹²⁴ Geiss, *German Foreign Policy*, 183, “Herbert von Bismarck to Bernhard von Bulow, 15 June 1877,” Otto-von-Bismarck-Stiftung (Otto von Bismarck Foundation), *Schriften* (Writings), ed. Natalie Wohlleben, accessed 27 Dec 2023, <https://www.bismarck-biografie.de/en/quellen/schriften/939-1877-06-15-kissinger-diktat>; “Foreign and Alliance Policy: 1871-1890,” Otto-von-Bismarck-Stiftung; and Ulrich, “Foreign Policy and Imperialism.”

¹²⁵ Ulrich, “Foreign Policy and Imperialism,” McDonough, *The Origins of the First and Second World Wars*, 4, and Geiss, *German Foreign Policy*, 31.

Even before the Russians declared war, Bismarck had made clear he wanted no part of the conflict when he spoke to the Reichstag on 5 December 1876. In this speech, he famously declared that “I don’t see any interest in Germany in all of this, which would...be worth the healthy bones of a single Pomeranian musketeer...we must be more economical with the blood of our countrymen and our soldiers than use it for an arbitrary policy to which no interest compels us.”¹²⁶

Withing ten months, the Russians had crushed the Ottoman army, becoming the Balkans’ foremost actor.¹²⁷ A few months after the war, in February 1878, Bismarck again spoke to the Reichstag. He reiterated his belief in the lack of any vital German interest in Southeastern Europe or in the details of a settlement: “In my opinion, none of these things affect German interests to the extent that we could jeopardize relations with our border neighbors, with our friends.”¹²⁸

Bismarck, who had remained scrupulously neutral during the conflict, was attempting to set himself up as a disinterested third party who might act as a post-war mediator or, as he describes it, as “an honest broker who really wants to get the deal done.”¹²⁹ He understood the motivations of the participants and because Germany had no specific national interests, Bismarck would be able to stay above the fray and help mediate disagreements. Of course, Bismarck had

¹²⁶ “Speech in the Reichstag, Berlin, 5 December 1876,” Otto-von-Bismarck-Stiftung (Otto von Bismarck Foundation), Schriften (Political Communication) ed. Natalie Wohlleben, accessed 24 Jan 2024, <https://www.bismarck-biografie.de/en/quellen/politische-kommunikation/660-rede-im-reichstag-1876-12-05>

¹²⁷ Abrams, *Bismarck and the German Empire*, 23.

¹²⁸ “Speech in the Reichstag, Berlin, 19 February 1878,” Otto-von-Bismarck-Stiftung (Otto von Bismarck Foundation), Schriften (Political Communication), ed. Natalie Wohlleben, accessed 24 Jan 2024, <https://www.bismarck-biografie.de/en/quellen/politische-kommunikation/662-rede-im-reichstag-1878-02-19>

¹²⁹ “Speech in the Reichstag, Berlin, 19 February 1878,” Otto-von-Bismarck-Stiftung. Bismarck’s stated goal was to assist the parties to come to a best settlement by their own accord, not by being an arbiter and forcing a solution on them by the power of the German state. See also Abrams, *Bismarck and the German Empire*, 23; Christopher M. Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (New York: Harper, 2013), 125; and Ulrich, “Foreign Policy and Imperialism.”

an additional motive for helping to mediate the end of the conflict which was to curtail the creation of any anti-German alliances.¹³⁰

During July of 1878, Bismarck hosted the Congress of Berlin to finalize a treaty formally ending the Russo-Turkish War. In March though, at the end of hostilities, the preliminary Treaty of San Stefano had been signed. As a rough draft, this treaty was intended to be modified and formalized at a later date. The San Stefano agreement was received negatively across Europe. The other great powers, especially Austria-Hungary and Great Britain, were concerned about a developing Russian hegemony throughout southeastern Europe.¹³¹ The San Stefano agreement had given the Russians much of what they had sought when they had initiated military action.¹³²

At the Congress, Russia demanded of Bismarck “a quid pro quo in the Orient for the benevolent neutrality of 1870/71.” (Russia had maintained neutrality during the Franco-Prussian War). Bismarck refused, citing his need to be an ‘honest broker.’¹³³ This was only the beginning of the issues that would anger the Russians consequent to final treaty negotiations and outcomes.

The resultant Treaty of Berlin “significantly reduced the size and independence of the new Bulgarian state,”¹³⁴ but allowed Russia to keep territory it had gained and allowed Austria-Hungary to occupy Bosnia-Herzegovina, amongst other changes.¹³⁵ The Russians were outraged with the results of the negotiations and felt their influence in the area was being wrongly

¹³⁰ Bregu, “The Causes of the Balkan Wars,” 116-17.

¹³¹ Bregu, “The Causes of the Balkan Wars,” 118, and Geiss, *German Foreign Policy*, 31.

¹³² 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. See McDonough, *The Origins of the First and Second World Wars*, 4, and Bregu, “The Causes of the Balkan Wars,” 118.

¹³³ “Foreign and Alliance Policy: 1871-1890,” Otto-von-Bismarck-Stiftung.

¹³⁴ Bregu, “The Causes of the Balkan Wars,” 118-19.

¹³⁵ “The Treaty of Berlin, 1878,” in *Documents of German History*, ed. Louis L. Snyder (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1958), 236-39.

curtailed.¹³⁶ Bismarck had traded somewhat stable relations with Russia for an enhanced European diplomatic status and improved relations with Austria-Hungary.¹³⁷

The effects of the Berlin Congress were wide, deep, and lasting. Russia came to understand that, regardless of any relationship between it and Germany, the Germans would always side with the Austrians in any Austro-Hungarian/Russian disagreement.¹³⁸ This put the *Dreikaiserbund* to an end. The German/Austria-Hungary bond had been solidified, but this might be considered something of an albatross around Germany's neck due to the gradual loss of power and influence afflicting the Dual Monarchy. It is important to understand that the anger the Russians felt after the 1878 Congress of Berlin affected Russo-German relations, festering under the surface, up until the First World War.

The *Dreikaiserbund* had become the *Zweikaiserbund*. But the understanding among the emperors had not been an actual alliance. Bismarck had described it in his February 1878 speech in the Reichstag this way:

The relationship of the three emperors, if you want to call it that, while it is usually called an alliance, is not based on any written commitments at all, and none of the three emperors is obliged to be overruled by the other two emperors. It is based on the personal sympathy between the three monarchs, on the personal trust that these high lords have in one another, and on the relationship of the leading ministers in all three kingdoms based on long-standing personal relationships.¹³⁹

¹³⁶ Kronenbitter, "Alliance System 1914," and Richard F. Hamilton and Holger H. Herwig, *Decisions for War, 1914-1917* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 37.

¹³⁷ Roberto Sciarone, "Germany's Next War: Assumptions and Military Strategies of the German Army in 1905," in *Empires and Nations from the Eighteenth to the Twentieth Century: Volume 2*, ed. by Antonello Biagini and Giovanna Motta (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 278, and McDonough, *The Origins of the First and Second World Wars*, 4.

¹³⁸ Underlying the German-Austrian relationship was the Wagnerian concept of '*Nibelungentreue*,' the cultural unity of the German peoples, so named in 1909 by then-Chancellor Bernhard von Bülow. See Kronenbitter, "Alliance System 1914."

¹³⁹ "Speech in the Reichstag, Berlin, 19 February 1878." Otto-von-Bismarck-Stiftung.

In other words, it was a friendly understanding meant to act as a Balm of Gilead to soothe international discomfort.

But the changing geopolitical environment began to demand agreements with more substance. Three of these arrangements were agreed to by the German Empire over the next few years. The first of the three was between Germany and Austria-Hungary. This was the *Zweibund*, the Dual Alliance. The other two were the Triple Alliance and the Reinsurance Treaty.

After the Congress of Berlin, Bismarck concentrated on domestic issues. He instituted agricultural and industrial tariffs, further displeasing the Russians. Tsar Alexander II made his displeasure known with some saber rattling on his western border and by complaining directly to Kaiser Wilhelm I in a letter sent in mid-August 1879.¹⁴⁰ Because of the threatening stance of the Russians, Bismarck was soon in Austria negotiating an alliance. In less than eight weeks, both the German kaiser and the Austro-Hungarian emperor had ratified the Dual Alliance treaty which was to be kept secret.¹⁴¹

The *Zweibund* was a defensive treaty. The preamble clearly states that the treaty was “calculated to consolidate the peace of Europe...solemnly promising each other never to allow their purely defensive agreement to develop an aggressive tendency in any direction.”¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ “Foreign and Alliance Policy: 1871-1890,” Otto-von-Bismarck-Stiftung, and Geiss, *German Foreign Policy*, 35.

¹⁴¹ Geiss, *German Foreign Policy*, 36. The full text of the treaty may be viewed at Hamerow, ed., *The Age of Bismarck*, 272-75; The Avalon Project, “The Dual Alliance Between Austria-Hungary and Germany - October 7, 1879,” 19th Century Documents: 1800-1899, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/dualalli.asp; “The Bismarckian Treaty System: The Dual Alliance, 1879,” in *Documents of German History*, ed. Louis L. Snyder (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1958), 242-44; and The World War I Document Archive, “The Dual Alliance Between Austria-Hungary and Germany,” Official Papers, last modified 20 May 2009, https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/The_Dual_Alliance_Between_Austria-Hungary_and_Germany.

¹⁴² German History in Documents and Images, “Dual Alliance with Austria (October 7, 1879),” Forging an Empire: Bismarckian Germany (1866-1890), https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=1856.

Germany pledged to come to the aid of Austria-Hungary with its “whole war strength” if that empire were attacked by Russia. Austria-Hungary pledged the same to Germany. In the event one of the two parties was attacked by a third power other than Russia, the second party was to observe “a benevolent neutrality.” Interestingly, this meant that in the event of a French attack on Germany, Austria was not obligated to lend its support. Because of this, Austria’s primary danger (Russia) was covered; Germany’s (France) was not.¹⁴³ This looks to be a poor deal, but the apparent lack of benefit for Germany is not as it seems. Günther Kronenbitter explains:

Bismarck wanted to shield the Habsburg Monarchy from Russian aggression and to get a say in Austria’s foreign policy. Without German consent, any diplomatic or military action taken by the Austrians that led to Russian countermeasures might jeopardize Germany’s commitment to the alliance. The *casus foederis*, Bismarck made clear in the 1880s, would only be triggered if Austria’s actions were first cleared with Berlin and the subsequent Russian attack labeled “unprovoked.” In this way, Bismarck avoided a situation in which the weaker of the allies would be able to steer the stronger one towards war. The German chancellor was not only trying to commit Vienna to close coordination of its Balkan policy with Berlin; he also hoped to make the Dual Alliance the cornerstone of cooperation in other fields and to tie the Habsburg Monarchy to the German Reich in a way reminiscent of the Holy Roman Empire.¹⁴⁴

In addition, if France were to attack Germany, Russia would almost certainly be drawn in as well. This would then also draw in Austria-Hungary.

And for Bismarck, there was another benefit to the *Zweibund*. The ratification of a treaty with Catholic Austria soothed the nerves of German Catholics who had been targeted by Bismarck in a domestic *Kulturkampf* early in his chancellorship.¹⁴⁵

One unhelpful outcome should be noted. Bismarck thought the security of the alliance would dampen any Austro-Hungarian urge to intervene in the Balkans. The reverse was true. A

¹⁴³ Hamerow, ed., *The Age of Bismarck*, 272-75, and Kronenbitter, “Alliance System 1914.”

¹⁴⁴ Kronenbitter, “Alliance System 1914.”

¹⁴⁵ Abrams, *Bismarck and the German Empire*, 23.

feeling of greater security emboldened Austria-Hungary in its struggle against Pan-Slavism and Balkan nationalism. This added instability to the region.¹⁴⁶

Much was built on the foundation laid by the Dual Alliance. One purpose of the treaty was to persuade Russia to re-engage with diplomacy based on an alliance of the Three Emperors.¹⁴⁷ Whether or not this supposedly secret treaty had any effect in that regard, the Russians were soon making inquiries into a revival of the *Dreikaiserbund* (the League of the Three Emperors). After much negotiation, this understanding was renewed in June 1881. Bismarck was hopeful that the revival of the understanding would eliminate the possibility of a Franco-Russian alliance.¹⁴⁸

The actual workings of the rekindled agreement of the three emperors were that each of the three countries represented would remain neutral if one of the others were attacked by a fourth power. A pledge to work toward resolving issues associated with Turkey and the Balkans was also included.¹⁴⁹

Therefore, at this point, Germany and Austria-Hungary were strongly linked through the Dual Alliance, both were tenuously linked to Russia through the *Dreikaiserbund*, and France was marginalized just as Bismarck had planned. The other two significant powers, Britain and Italy, were not of present great import to Bismarck's calculus. Britain was located off the continent

¹⁴⁶ McDonough, *The Origins of the First and Second World Wars*, 4.

¹⁴⁷ "Foreign and Alliance Policy: 1871-1890," Otto-von-Bismarck-Stiftung.

¹⁴⁸ Geiss, *German Foreign Policy*, 40, and "The Three Emperors' League, 1881," in *Documents of German History*, ed. Louis L. Snyder (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1958), 247.

¹⁴⁹ Geiss, *German Foreign Policy*, 40. The full text of the treaty may be viewed at Hamerow, ed., *The Age of Bismarck*, 279-81; The Avalon Project, "The Three Emperors League - June 18, 1881," 19th Century Documents: 1800-1899, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/empleagu.asp; "The Three Emperors' League, 1881," in *Documents of German History*, ed. Louis L. Snyder (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1958), 247-50; The World War I Document Archive, "The Three Emperors' League," Official Papers, last modified 28 May 2009, https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/The_Three_Emperors%27_League; and German History in Documents and Images, "Three Emperors' Treaty with Austria and Russia (June 18, 1881)," Forging an Empire: Bismarckian Germany (1866-1890), https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=1858

and was not inclined to ally with the *Zweibund* due to a perpetually difficult relationship with Russia.¹⁵⁰ Great Britain would gain great significance, though, in the era of *Weltpolitik* under Wilhelm II.

Compared to the other Great Powers, Italy was far less powerful. However, when the Italian ambassador approached Bismarck in January 1882 with a proposal for his country to join the Dual Alliance, Bismarck was quite interested. Italy did carry some influence in the Mediterranean and was concurrently contesting with France over the colonization of Tunisia.¹⁵¹ Conversely, Italy could (and did) cause some problems for Germany's primary ally, Austria-Hungary. Bismarck reasoned that by allying Italy with the Dual Alliance and forming a Triple Alliance, he could further isolate France and, at the same time, diminish Italo-Austrian friction.¹⁵²

To be clear, the signing of the Triple Alliance on 20 May 1882 did not negate the Dual Alliance. These were separate pacts. Of course, if the Dual Alliance collapsed, so would the Triple Alliance. But if the Triple Alliance collapsed, the Dual Alliance would remain in effect.¹⁵³

The treaty provided that if either Italy or Germany were attacked by France or any two Great Powers, the other two treaty signatories would be required to join the fight with the begrieved party. If one of the three signatories found itself threatened by any one Great Power

¹⁵⁰ German History in Documents and Images, "Three Emperors' Treaty with Austria and Russia (June 18, 1881).

¹⁵¹ See Archibald Cary Coolidge, *Origins of the Triple Alliance* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1917), 191-208, for a detailed description of the Italo-French dispute over Tunisia.

¹⁵² Hamerow, ed., *The Age of Bismarck*, 282.

¹⁵³ Geiss, *German Foreign Policy*, 42. The last sentence in this paragraph describes essentially what happened when war broke out in 1914 and Italy chose to stay neutral, then entered the war a year later on the side of the Entente.

and engaged in war with it, the other two signatories could remain neutral or aid their cosigner militarily.¹⁵⁴

With the signing of the Triple Alliance, it would seem Bismarck had accomplished his main goal of isolating France, whom he encouraged to “pursue her colonial ambitions in Africa... (This would) make it easier for France to accept her loss of status in Europe.”¹⁵⁵ He also felt he had dampened the possibility of an Austro-Hungarian dispute with either Russia or Italy. But Bismarck’s web of alliances was just that, a web. It had no real strength, only the ability to entangle the Germans in its adhesive fibrils. The Three Emperors’ League was only an understanding, not a true alliance, and was unable to weather much of a storm. Italy was the most unreliable of allies, and would prove so within the first year of the First World War.¹⁵⁶ The only bond of any real substance was that between Germany and Austria-Hungary, but being tied to the Dual Monarchy was of little help to the Germans. The German diplomatic rope to Austria was not short enough to influence all of Austria’s decisions as Bismarck had hoped when the Dual Alliance was formed. But it was strong enough to drag the Germans along with the Austrians into the abyss of an international crisis. Bismarck was like the first little pig in his house of straw. He felt protected from the outside but soon found out he wasn’t safe at all.

By the mid-1880s, the boat was rocked again. A new crisis arose in Bulgaria in 1885-87 between Russia and Bulgaria which directly and militarily involved Serbia and Austria-Hungary and indirectly involved Great Britain. The details of this crisis are not germane to this paper, but

¹⁵⁴ Sciarrone, “Germany’s Next War,” 278-79. The full text of the treaty may be viewed at Hamerow, ed., *The Age of Bismarck*, 285-87, “The Triple Alliance, 1882,” in *Documents of German History*, ed. Louis L. Snyder (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1958), 250-52; The World War I Document Archive, “The Triple Alliance,” Official Papers, last modified 20 May 2009, [https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/The_Triple_Alliance_\(The_English_Translation\)](https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/The_Triple_Alliance_(The_English_Translation)); and German History in Documents and Images, “Triple Alliance with Austria and Italy (May 20, 1882),” Forging an Empire: Bismarckian Germany (1866-1890), https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=1860

¹⁵⁵ Ruth Henig, *The Origins of the First World War*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2002), 4.

¹⁵⁶ Hastings, *Catastrophe 1914*, 108.

because the Germans had shown support to Austria-Hungary during the crisis “the pan-Slav press now viewed Germany as the guardian of Austria’s Balkan interests and the chief impediment to the exercise of Russia’s custodianship over the Balkans.”¹⁵⁷ The final outcome was the definitive end of the *Dreikaiserbund*.¹⁵⁸

At the same time, another issue had come to the fore. This was the issue of colonialism. Bismarck’s stance on colonialism as per economic considerations was addressed above in Chapter Two, but more should be said about the geopolitical aspects of it.

During the 1870s and early 1880s, Bismarck had made a very conscious effort to not offend the British by avoiding colonialization.¹⁵⁹ But, as we noted earlier, domestic pressures exerted enough influence to cause Bismarck to reconsider his position. In a 26 June 1884 speech in the Reichstag, Bismarck makes clear that his attitude had not changed:

I have not abandoned my former aversion to colonies...which make a strip of land their foundation, and then seek to draw emigrants, appoint officials, and establish garrisons. This mode of colonisation may be good for other countries, but it is not practicable for us. I do not believe that colonial projects can be artificially established.¹⁶⁰

But he goes on to explain that private persons who wish to embark on “colonial endeavors” may do so, but he wants to limit government involvement to the granting of charters to private citizens so that they might themselves take on “the material development of a colony... (and) government of the same.” Bismarck sums up his plans thusly: “It is not our intention to found provinces, but commercial undertakings.”¹⁶¹ By operating its colonies in a

¹⁵⁷ Clark, *The Sleepwalkers*, 126.

¹⁵⁸ Geiss, *German Foreign Policy*, 40, and Abrams, *Bismarck and the German Empire*, 24

¹⁵⁹ Clark, *The Sleepwalkers*, 125.

¹⁶⁰ William Harbutt Dawson, *Bismarck and State Socialism: An Exposition of the Social and Economic Legislation of Germany Since 1870*, 2nd ed. (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1891), 150-51, and German History in Documents and Images, “Bismarck on ‘Pragmatic’ Colonization (June 26, 1884),” Forging an Empire: Bismarckian Germany (1866-1890), https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=1868

¹⁶¹ Hamerow, ed., *The Age of Bismarck*, 305-07.

manner that ceded much control to the business interests involved, the German government acted to limit its direct national involvement but, most importantly, expenses in its colonies.¹⁶²

Bismarck made every effort to avoid creating offense to other countries or to involve the Reich in affairs away from Europe. Europe is where Bismarck knew to be the vital concerns of the German people, not in Asia or Africa.

Bismarck then took the opportunity to again act the mediator by hosting the 1884-85 Berlin West Africa Conference, which was intended to “manage the ongoing process of colonisation in Africa (the ‘Scramble’ as it was dubbed by a Times columnist) so as to avoid the outbreak of armed conflict between rival colonial powers.”¹⁶³ For our purposes, the important outcome of the conference was that Bismarck once again showed that Germany could be a leader in the international arena.

After the end of the *Dreikaiserbund*, the League of the Three Emperors, the Russo-German relationship was once again at a nadir. The tense relationship with Russia did assist Bismarck in one respect. In 1887, a bill passed the Reichstag which provided increased military spending.¹⁶⁴

Also in 1887 Bismarck made a breakthrough. Knowing cooperation between Russia and Austria-Hungary was no longer possible, Bismarck negotiated the secret Reinsurance Treaty with the Russians alone. This agreement had an initial term of three years. It provided that, in the event that either country “should find itself at war with a third Great Power, the other would maintain a benevolent neutrality...” Exceptions were spelled out. Either party could come to the

¹⁶² Steven Press, “Buying Sovereignty: German ‘Weltpolitik’ and Private Enterprise, 1884–1914,” *Central European History* 55, no. 1 (2022): 20.

¹⁶³ Matthew Craven, “Between Law and History: The Berlin Conference of 1884-1885 and the Logic of Free Trade,” *London Review of International Law* 3, no. 1 (March 2015): 31-32. Also see Boris Barth, “Imperialism,” 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. Ute Daniel et al., Freie Universität Berlin, last modified 4 Mar 2015, DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.10567.

¹⁶⁴ Abrams, *Bismarck and the German Empire*, 24.

assistance of either Austria or France if one of those countries were attacked by the other party.¹⁶⁵ In other words, if Germany attacked France (which Bismarck would never do), Russia could intervene and Germany would be in a dreaded two-front war. But if France attacked Germany (which Bismarck and most other high officials were highly concerned might happen), Germany could defend itself without the worry of a two-front war. This was a diplomatic masterstroke.

But one must remember that the Dual Alliance was still in effect. Therefore, Germany now had conflicting secret agreements with Austria-Hungary and Russia. This was of no concern to Bismarck who knew he could act on the one that most suited his situation in the event of a military crisis.¹⁶⁶ Whichever he chose, the other party would gladly go along. In fact, in order to shore up Germany's relationship with Russia, Bismarck was considering offering the Russians free rein in the Balkans, possibly even severing Germany's relationship with Austria.¹⁶⁷ It would seem Bismarck was not a great devotee of the notion of *Nibelungentreue*. But any plans Bismarck had as to cutting ties with the Austro-Hungarians were soon squelched.

The year 1888 was the *Dreikaiserjahr*, the Year of the Three Emperors. Wilhelm I died on 9 March. His son Friedrich III, already dying of cancer when he ascended to the throne, only lived a few weeks before he too passed on 15 June. And so the son of Friedrich III and grandson of Wilhelm I, Wilhelm II, became kaiser and would serve through the end of the First World War.

¹⁶⁵ Hamilton and Herwig, *Decisions for War, 1914-1917*, 33. The full text of the treaty may be viewed at Hamerow, ed., *The Age of Bismarck*, 287-89; "The Reinsurance Treaty, 1887," in *Documents of German History*, ed. Louis L. Snyder (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1958), 256-58; The World War I Document Archive, "The Reinsurance Treaty," Official Papers, last modified 28 May 2009, https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/The_Reinsurance_Treaty; and German History in Documents and Images, "Secret Reinsurance Treaty with Russia (June 18, 1887)," Forging an Empire: Bismarckian Germany (1866-1890), https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=1862

¹⁶⁶ McDonough, *The Origins of the First and Second World Wars*, 4.

¹⁶⁷ "Foreign and Alliance Policy: 1871-1890," Otto-von-Bismarck-Stiftung.

With more fervor than his grandfather, Wilhelm I, had protested entering into a military alliance with Austria-Hungary in 1879, Wilhelm II now blocked the undoing of that relationship.

This was the beginning of a contentious relationship between the kaiser and the chancellor that would end in Bismarck's forced resignation in 1890.¹⁶⁸

1888 had brought even more change. Moltke the Elder retired, having served as Chief of the General Staff until nearly eighty-eight years of age. He was succeeded by the odd and paranoiac Alfred von Waldersee who lasted only two years in the service of the impulsive and capricious Wilhelm II. Waldersee had little long-term influence.

The years 1888-90 mark the transition to a completely new paradigm of German policy, the *Neuer Kurs* (New Course). By 1891, there was a new kaiser (Wilhelm II), a new chancellor (Leo von Caprivi), and a new chief of the General Staff (Alfred von Schlieffen). The importance of Schlieffen has been much discussed above. Caprivi's tenure was marked by freer trade policy, improved relations with Britain as to colonialization, and, of cataclysmic importance, allowing the Reinsurance Treaty with Russia to lapse.¹⁶⁹

The departure of Bismarck had left a power vacuum into which the head of the Foreign Office Political Department, Friedrich von Holstein, ensconced himself, allowing him undue influence. Holstein, along with a younger group of the diplomatic corps, had wished to rid Germany of the old guard methods of Bismarck and of the elder Moltke. It was Holstein, once Bismarck had resigned, who pressed for the end of the Reinsurance Treaty so that Germany might scheme with Austria-Hungary to develop war plans directed at Russia. Bismarck had, in an effort to fence Austria into a defensive position, prevented any planning for joint operations

¹⁶⁸ "Foreign and Alliance Policy: 1871-1890," Otto-von-Bismarck-Stiftung. See also Erich Eyck, *Bismarck and the German Empire* (San Francisco: Normandy Press, 2016), 320-322, for an excellent description of the machinations of Bismarck's forced resignation.

¹⁶⁹ Geiss, *German Foreign Policy*, 60-62.

between his general staff and that of Austria-Hungary.¹⁷⁰ Caprivi, who had no foreign policy experience, and Wilhelm, intoxicated by the possibilities of a post-Bismarck world, bowed to the wishes of Holstein. A jilted Russia became friendly with France, and by 1892, a Franco-Russian alliance was in place that would endure to the beginning of the First World War.¹⁷¹ Germany was once again in the position of having to fight a *Zweifrontenkrieg* if war were to come.

Allowing the Reinsurance treaty to collapse was a key cobblestone in the road to the First World War. It was a very ill-advised, rash, and foolhardy maneuver. It was not, though, meant to be an aggressive move towards war. Its purpose was to allow Germany to develop concrete plans in accordance with their most important ally, Austria-Hungary. Holstein and his cadre were not war mongers. They truly felt their approach of a more defensive stance in the west combined with more offensive actions in the east was the best means by which to protect Germany. Unfortunately, they were strikingly short-sighted and did not appreciate the obvious consequence, a Franco-Russian alliance, which would arise from their decision. This Franco-Russian alliance would be the foundation for the eventual construction of the Triple Entente, which would stand in opposition to Germany's Triple Alliance.¹⁷² The battle lines for the future war were already being put in place.

Negotiations between France and Russia began for a military convention which was later upgraded to a formal alliance. The Franco-Russian Alliance was concluded in August 1892. It was defensive in nature but was directed at Germany. It stipulated that if Germany attacked (or assisted another country in attacking) either France or Russia, the other partner was required to

¹⁷⁰ Ritter, *The Schlieffen Plan: Critique of a Myth*, 21-22.

¹⁷¹ Clark, *The Sleepwalkers*, 143-44, 197. The actions of Holstein and his office, who had never supported the aims of Bismarck and secretly worked against them are reminiscent of modern U.S. Department of State bureaucrats who secretly toil to flout instruction from the executive in order to realize their personal foreign policy objectives.

¹⁷² One must remember that the Triple Alliance was in reality only the Dual Alliance as Italy was known to be unreliable.

engage Germany with full forces. This would place Germany in the position of having to fight simultaneously on two fronts. In an effort to facilitate this agreement, the French financed the building of strategic Russian railways and the purchase of arms for the Russian military. Russia would support French claims in Alsace-Lorraine and in return France would support Russian claims in the Balkan. A grimly significant effect of the Franco-Russian Alliance was to tie western Europe to the unstable Balkans.¹⁷³ Another effect of great consequence was that when Schlieffen realized the position Holstein, Caprivi, and Wilhelm had placed the Reich, he began to develop his plans to counter a two-front war.¹⁷⁴

By the end of 1894, Wilhelm had replaced Caprivi, with whom he had repeatedly been at odds, with Chlodwig, Prince Hohenlohe-Schillingsfürst. Hohenlohe had held many prominent government positions. He, like Caprivi was of a liberal bent, and not a strong leader. Hohenlohe was elderly and far from robust. He was easily swayed by the young Wilhelm who wished to rule of his own accord. Hohenlohe had no intention of standing in Wilhelm's way.¹⁷⁵

Another ill-omened event of 1894 was the death of Tsar Alexander III. The less-than-competent Nicholas II became tsar.

Wilhelm had already been quarreling with Great Britain over a number of colonies when, in January of 1896, he made a major blunder that further soured Anglo-German relations. In the Transvaal region of South Africa, in a portent of the coming Second Boer War, the Boers had repelled a botched British raid. Soon after, Wilhelm sent the President of the Transvaal, Paul

¹⁷³ Kronenbitter, "Alliance System 1914;" Hamilton and Herwig, *Decisions for War, 1914-1917*, 34; and McDonough, *The Origins of the First and Second World Wars*, 10.

¹⁷⁴ The full text of the treaty may be viewed at The Avalon Project, "The Franco-Russian Alliance Military Convention - August 18, 1892," 19th Century Documents: 1800-1899, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/frumil.asp; and The World War I Document Archive, "The Franco-Russian Alliance Military Convention," Official Papers, last modified 28 May 2009, https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/The_Franco-Russian_Alliance_Military_Convention

¹⁷⁵ Geiss, *German Foreign Policy*, 69.

Kruger, a telegram of support and congratulations. The German public loved it; those on the Scepter'd Isle were incensed. Later, during the Second Boer War, with the German press openly supporting the Boers, the British were even more indignant.¹⁷⁶

None of this was helpful in establishing some level of rapport with the British. Détente with the British was now vitally important. With a Franco-Russian alliance in effect, there was a precarious balance on the continent between France and Russia on one hand and Germany and Austria-Hungary on the other. Balance of power engenders peace. But whichever side of the scales Britain came down on would tip the balance to that side's favor. The German foreign service was convinced that Anglo-Russian antagonism was so ingrained that it "would remain a central factor for Great Power diplomacy no matter how Germany acted."¹⁷⁷ But there was a limit to British forbearance and Wilhelm would continue to find ways to push Britain into the arms of two of its oldest adversaries, France and Russia. The most important of those ways was his embrace of *Weltpolitik* and its attendant naval expansion.

The idea of *Weltpolitik*,¹⁷⁸ the transformation of Germany into a world power, had been percolating through the political and military leadership and certain sectors of the intelligentsia since Germany's unification.¹⁷⁹ The spirit of *Weltpolitik*, its *Geist*, was capsulized first in Bernhard von Bülow's December 1897 'Place in the Sun' speech discussed above in Chapter Two. (Wilhelm had appointed Bülow state secretary for foreign affairs in October 1897.) Germany was declaring that it deserved an equal place in world affairs and meant to have it, but without "put(ting) anyone in our shadow."

¹⁷⁶ Hamilton and Herwig, *Decisions for War, 1914-1917*, 35. Also see "The Kruger Telegram, 1896," in *Documents of German History*, ed. Louis L. Snyder (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1958), 278-79.

¹⁷⁷ Erich Brandenburg, *From Bismarck to the World War: A History of German Foreign Policy 1870-1914*, trans. Annie Elizabeth Adams (London: Oxford University Press, 1926), 514, 516, and Barth, "Imperialism."

¹⁷⁸ *Weltpolitik* was the strategy; *Weltmacht* was the goal. A more appropriate term might be *Weltmachtspolitik*, 'world power policies.'

¹⁷⁹ Geiss, *German Foreign Policy*, 80.

This thinking was not all puffery. The burgeoning industrial base of the Second Reich needed consistent delivery of raw materials and access to foreign markets, “yet any attempt to gain power on the world stage, either in Europe or beyond it, met the resistance of the traditional Great Powers, whose leaders feared that the European balance of power would be overturned.”¹⁸⁰ In this way, the other Great Powers were obliging Germany to pursue *Weltpolitik* and its attendant *Weltmacht*. Germany had the world’s second largest industrial economy (the U.S. had the largest). It would need raw materials and other inputs. The attempts to frustrate the acquisition of those needed items by the other Great Powers were provocative moves.

Requisite to Germany’s ‘Place in the Sun’ was a strong navy. Consequent to that would be a bruising naval competition with Great Britain.

The naval strategy that was the core support for the concept of *Weltpolitik* was to remake the German navy into a battleship-heavy, ocean-going *Flotte*. Alfred von Tirpitz, who had become naval secretary in 1897, planned to develop a flotilla of enough battleships to enable the Germans to destroy or heavily damage the British fleet. This daunting strength of the *Kaiserliche Marine* would discourage the Royal Navy from engaging with it and encourage the British to consent to German policy objectives and its colonial aspirations.¹⁸¹ This expanded navy, therefore, might be seen as being constructed more as a “diplomatic lever for extracting concessions in peacetime” than as a war-fighting organization.¹⁸² That, at least, was Tirpitz’s vision. The British failed to cooperate.

In April 1898, the Reichstag ratified the first navy law. A second followed in 1900. These bills absorbed “one-fifth of the military budget – for the construction of three large ships

¹⁸⁰ Hewitson, *Germany and the Causes*, 145. Also see McDonough, *The Origins of the First and Second World Wars*, 8.

¹⁸¹ Stein, “Pre-war Military Planning (Germany),” Barth, “Imperialism,” and Berghahn, “Origins,” 26.

¹⁸² Seligmann, “Pre-war Military Planning.”

per year.”¹⁸³ It was Tirpitz’s plan that the German fleet be expanded over twenty years to sixty large battleships and a “projected German-British force ratio in capital ships of 2:3.” He considered that ratio adequate to square off against the Royal Navy.¹⁸⁴

Tirpitz was calculating Germany could gain relative parity with the UK because the lion’s share of British shipbuilding would be dedicated to replacing aging ships, whereas each ship the Germans built would be a new addition to its growing fleet. All of Tirpitz’s calculations, plans, and hopes were based on Germany matching or exceeding British construction ship for ship. Tirpitz also envisaged that, even accepting that Germany might never equal Great Britain in terms of gross ship tonnage, the Germans could compensate by surpassing the British in terms of superior battle tactics and quality training of seamen.¹⁸⁵

The pursuit of *Weltpolitik* had both immediate and long-term effects. On the positive side, the program was very popular with the middle and upper classes.¹⁸⁶ The German domestic state of affairs were stabilized to a degree as the focus of politics was redirected from the domestic to the international arena.¹⁸⁷ Success in that international arena would act to boost support for the rule of the kaiser and diminish the allure of socialism.¹⁸⁸ This is an example of the effect of popular *Aussenpolitik* on stabilizing *Innenpolitik*.

On the negative side of the ledger, the program introduced more instability into an international system already unsteady. The other powers had no desire for increased competition on the world stage. The British, with whom the Germans should have been trying to cultivate a

¹⁸³ Hewitson, *Germany and the Causes*, 114, and “German Naval Legislation, 1900,” in *Documents of German History*, ed. Louis L. Snyder (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1958), 281-84.

¹⁸⁴ Dirk Bönker, “Naval Race between Germany and Great Britain, 1898-1912,” 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. Ute Daniel et al., Freie Universität Berlin, last modified 11 Jan 2015, DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.10536.

¹⁸⁵ Berghahn, “Origins,” 27.

¹⁸⁶ Ulrich, “Foreign Policy and Imperialism.”

¹⁸⁷ Press, “Buying Sovereignty,” 16.

¹⁸⁸ McDonough, *The Origins of the First and Second World Wars*, 8.

strong bond, were obviously very displeased. Expanding their naval spending disrupted the budgetary process and they felt threatened both militarily and economically.¹⁸⁹ The policy of *Weltpolitik*, which tainted Anglo-German relations more than any other factor, pushed the British to seek an alliance with the French, Britain's greatest enemy for the majority of the past millennium. This was by far the most damaging effect of *Weltpolitik* and had the greatest long-term consequence. In this way, *Weltpolitik*, meant to allow Germany to expand its influence and its economy and to provide it with a measure of protection, actually was a major factor in the demise of the *Kaiserreich*.

In the British mind, the German government seemed to be doing all that it could to push Britain away. In fact, in 1898, the British made a very serious proposal for a treaty with the Triple Alliance. They were rebuffed by the Germans who felt that they could keep more freedom of action in their policy without the treaty and that the British would be hindered by a chronically antagonistic relationship with the Russians and colonial competition with the French.¹⁹⁰ This is an exemplary illustration of being too clever by half.

Weltpolitik not only led to international difficulties, but it also led to interdepartmental disputes within the German military. In previous decades, almost all defensive emphasis had been placed on the army. The navy had been almost an afterthought. After the passage of the navy bills, some competition commenced for funding of the two armed services. The army and the navy found themselves in more of a rivalry than a partnership as they vied for funding and often in support of very different, even divergent, foreign policy stances.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁹ Press, "Buying Sovereignty," 16.

¹⁹⁰ Ulrich, "Foreign Policy and Imperialism."

¹⁹¹ Hewitson, *Germany and the Causes*, 114.

Curiously, though, *Weltpolitik* could be said to have actually decreased the likelihood of war. The more energy, resources, and attention given to the German navy, the less there were available for the German army. The navy was a less bellicose establishment, aware that it could only continue to expand in a climate of peace. The more confrontational army that often argued for preemptive military measures found its demands and actions were constrained and delimited in the emphasis on the navy in the world of *Weltpolitik*.¹⁹²

The enmeshing and intertwining of the web of alliances continued in the new century. Established alliances were renewed – for example, the Triple Alliance in 1902 – and new alliances and agreement continued to be created.

The most important of these new alliances, the Entente Cordial, produced both a firm connection between Britain and France, the penultimate step in the evolution of the Allied coalition in the First World War, and extreme consternation in Germany.

The Entente Cordial was concluded in April 1904. Its main function was not directed at Germany, but rather to dampen colonial disagreements between Britain and France. It is important to note the Entente Cordial was not a military alliance. A secondary motivation was that France, through the Franco-Russian Alliance, might be able to put the brakes on any developing quarrel between Britain and Russia. This mediation also might possibly lead to a more formal agreement between the British and the Russians.¹⁹³

The Entente Cordial was as detrimental to the Germans as it was helpful to the British, the French, and even the Russians. The Germans had missed the boat with Britain in 1898 when

¹⁹² Hewitson, *Germany and the Causes*, 115.

¹⁹³ Barth, “Imperialism,” and Clark, *The Sleepwalkers*, 139. The full text of the treaty may be viewed at The Avalon Project, “The Entente Cordiale Between England and France - April 8, 1904,” 20th Century Documents: 1900-1999, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/entecord.asp; and The World War I Document Archive, “The Entente Cordiale Between the United Kingdom and France,” Official Papers, last modified 28 May 2009, https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/The_Entente_Cordiale_Between_The_United_Kingdom_and_France

they were approached to consider a treaty between Britain and the Triple Alliance. At that time, relations between Britain and France were at a low water point due to the Fashoda Crisis.¹⁹⁴

Germany was handed a chance to greatly shore up its security, a chance that Bismarck would have eagerly seized. Later, the Germans poisoned the waters further by trying to build a navy large enough to attempt to directly compete with the British. This is but another example of the effects of the dramatic transformation of German foreign policy from the Bismarckian era to that of Wilhelm II and *Weltpolitik*. It was a transformation with overwhelmingly negative consequences.

The second exceptionally important event of 1904 was the beginning of the Russo-Japanese War. This war extended into 1905 and was a devastating loss and setback for the Russian Empire. Revolutionary forces took advantage and nearly toppled the tsar. It would take years for the Russians to restabilize their regime and to rebuild their military. Because of this, the Russians found their ability to act or react geopolitically to be extremely limited which added to the great flux of the international geopolitical situation.

The Russo-Japanese War was only one of the causes of geopolitical instability in the last ten years before the First World War. There were many ingredients to this stew. German miscues, misapprehensions, and mistakes have been discussed, but others were just as helpful stirring and seasoning the pot. During the Wilhelmine era, the pace of change in the state of foreign affairs steadily quickened.

The Fashoda Incident alluded to above nearly brought war to Europe. The French were the primary instigators in that crisis. There were constant issues in the Mediterranean involving the Italians, the British, the French, and others. The Boer War was a major incident for the

¹⁹⁴ See Clark, *The Sleepwalkers*, 132-33, for a concise explanation. A full description of the incident is not important for the purposes of this paper.

British and coloured their relations with others. The Chinese Boxer Rebellion and incidents involving the United States in the Caribbean, South America, and the Philippines occurred. The Balkans were, as always, a constant concern for Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire was on life support and facing revolution.

What is important here is to understand that the focus of this paper is the actions and decisions taken by the German Empire and therefore magnifies them. But these actions were not occurring in isolation and were really no different than the actions and decisions taken by its European neighbors. All of Europe participated in creating the climate that ripened into the Great War.

In 1905, the first of the two Moroccan crises effloresced directly from the Entente Cordial. In that document, Britain was given authority over Egypt. France received the same as to Morocco. Kaiser Wilhelm decided to use a French diplomatic and trade mission – the French were asking for special trading privileges from the Moroccans – to test the strength and closeness of the Anglo-French relationship. Although the Entente Cordial was declared a non-military agreement, Wilhelm suspected it actually was a military compact and began to feel the noose of encirclement tightening around him.¹⁹⁵

Morocco was important because of its location at the Straits of Gibraltar. In 1880, the Treaty of Madrid had been signed by all the European powers and the United States that laid out rights and privileges for foreign persons and entities in Morocco. The French foreign minister, Théophile Delcassé, was willfully ignoring that agreement. The Germans wished to challenge this French gambit. Wilhelm was convinced by Chancellor Bülow and Holstein to sail to the Moroccan port of Tangiers to issue a statement supporting the Moroccans and to demand equal

¹⁹⁵ McDonough, *The Origins of the First and Second World Wars*, 11.

privileges to any given to the French. Rumbblings of war and the rattling of sabers could be heard from North Africa across Europe. The British did not offer support and so the French premier backed down and dismissed his foreign minister, as per a German demand. It seemed that Germany had won the day and exposed the Entente Cordial to be of little substance. A conference to formally settle the differences between the countries was held across the Straits in port city of Algeciras, Spain, beginning in January 1906.¹⁹⁶

The conference was calamitous for Germany. It immediately found itself isolated with only the support of Austria-Hungary and the Moroccans, a foretaste of the encirclement it would experience later. The English strongly supported the French claims, as did the other Great Powers including Germany's supposed Triple Alliance partner, Italy. France got all that it wanted; Germany was humiliated and grew more worried about its geopolitical position.¹⁹⁷

The Moroccan incident had ratcheted up fears over Germany and its goals in the halls of Petersburg, the Quai d'Orsay, and at Whitehall, the centers of foreign policy in Russia, France, and Britain, respectively. The apprehension and fear engendered served to foster deeper rapport and greater cooperation between France and Russia and ultimately also with Britain.

By 1907, Britain had settled most of its differences with Russia over Afghanistan and Persia, easing its worries concerning Russian designs on the Indian subcontinent. This Russo-British agreement provided the third leg of the stool (the others being the Entente Cordiale and

¹⁹⁶ Samuel R. Williamson, Jr., "The Way to War," 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. Ute Daniel et al., Freie Universität Berlin, last modified 8 Oct 2014, DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.10152; Eric Brose, "Arms Race prior to 1914, Armament Policy," 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. Ute Daniel et al., Freie Universität Berlin, last modified 8 Oct 2014, DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.10219; and Jean-Marc Delaunay, "Moroccan Crises 1905-1911," 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. Ute Daniel et al., Freie Universität Berlin, last modified 8 Oct 2014, DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.10300. The Treaty of Madrid may be viewed at "Convention as to Protection in Morocco Between the United States, Germany, Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Spain, France, Great Britain, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal and Sweden and Norway and Morocco," *The American Journal of International Law* 6, no. 1 (1912): 18–26.

¹⁹⁷ Hamilton and Herwig, *Decisions for War, 1914-1917*, 35.

the Franco-Russian alliance) to form what soon was called the Triple Entente. The Germans thus began to feel further encircled with Russia to the East, France to the west, and Britain able to place a naval blockade on the northern German sea access.¹⁹⁸

The result of the First Moroccan Crisis is puzzling. One would think it obvious that Germany was in the right, even though one might agree it could have registered its complaint less dramatically than having the kaiser make a theatrical personal appearance. German officials did not actively seek war – the German public at large certainly did not want that – but felt the risk was worth taking in order to force the other powers, France in particular, to consider Germany's position in international circumstances.¹⁹⁹

It is not difficult to see how Germany might begin to feel that it was the target of a cabal intending to isolate, surround, and ultimately defeat it. France instigated the First Moroccan Crisis by blatantly and purposefully disregarding the Madrid Treaty. Germany stood up to France to protect its own interests and “with honor... to (assure) for the trade of the whole world the maintenance of the Open Door in Morocco.”²⁰⁰ It is no wonder the concept of *Einkreisung* (encirclement) was being cemented in the German mind.

As a side note, it is interesting that the Algeiras conference would play a small, but not insignificant, role in the start of the war in 1914. Because of the perception of injustice suffered

¹⁹⁸ McDonough, *The Origins of the First and Second World Wars*, 11; Hamilton and Herwig, *Decisions for War, 1914-1917*, 36; Kronenbitter, “Alliance System 1914;” and Brose, “Arms Race prior to 1914, Armament Policy.” Also see The Avalon Project, “The Anglo-Russian Entente – 1907,” 20th Century Documents: 1900-1999, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/angrusen.asp and The World War I Document Archive, “The Anglo-Russian Entente,” Official Papers, last modified 28 May 2009, https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/The_Anglo-Russian_Entente

¹⁹⁹ Hewitson, *Germany and the Causes*, 65, 184.

²⁰⁰ The World War I Document Archive, “LIV Berlin 29/1/1906,” ‘Willy-Nicky’ Letters XLIX-LXXXV (22 August 1905-26 March 1914), last modified 29 June 2009, https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/LIV_Berlin_29/1/190

by Germany at that time, the Germans and Austro-Hungarians were “wary of submitting Vienna’s case to a conference of Great Powers” in July of 1914.²⁰¹

Schlieffen retired at the end of 1905 and was replaced by the younger Moltke as of 1 January 1906. Schlieffen’s *Denkschrift* – the so-called Schlieffen Plan – was compiled as he was leaving office and was discussed above.

In June 1906, a third naval bill was ratified. This bill provided for the construction of three Dreadnought classes of battleship yearly. The British had just launched the HMS Dreadnought, the prototype of this variety of ship.²⁰² In size, armament, and propulsion, it thoroughly outclassed all previous types of battleships. As soon as the British learned the Germans were planning to build three Dreadnoughts yearly, they upped their production to four per annum. In the next naval bill, in 1908, the Germans matched that rate.²⁰³

Critics of the naval buildup began to appear both inside and outside the government. Bülow was prevented from increasing social benefits that he hoped would beguile and mesmerize the citizenry in order to inveigle votes away from the Socialists. The *Reichsheer* was also not happy with the naval arms race with Great Britain. It was a threat to the army’s budget as much as it was to that of the social programs. The army had initially been accommodating to heightened naval spending, refraining from asking for additional resources to increase the size of land forces. That stance was beginning to wear thin.²⁰⁴

With the cost of the naval program beginning to sink in, the formation of the Triple Entente in 1907 being realized, and the idea of *Einkreisung* (encirclement) coming to the fore, many observers began to call for a shift back to a focus on the strength and improvement of

²⁰¹ Hewitson, *Germany and the Causes*, 209, and Hastings, *Catastrophe 1914*, 65-66.

²⁰² Bönker, “Naval Race between Germany and Great Britain, 1898-1912.”

²⁰³ Bönker, “Naval Race between Germany and Great Britain, 1898-1912,” and Berghahn, “Origins,” 28.

²⁰⁴ Berghahn, “Origins,” 29-30.

German land forces, the army.²⁰⁵ These critics of the present direction of the military pointed out that the Germans had not caught the British unawares. Britain had responded and possessed the financial wherewithal to outspend and therefore outdistance German battleship production. In addition, the naval race was damaging to Anglo-German relations.²⁰⁶

In late 1905, the Sir Edward Grey was named the British foreign secretary. Grey nurtured a very well-nourished anti-German prejudice. Because of this, the posture of the British Foreign Office prior to the First World War was one of German antipathy. All things German were seen in the worst light and only those voices that hewed to the Anti-German bias were heard.²⁰⁷

One of those voices was Eyre Crowe, a senior diplomat in the department. Crowe, as much or more of an implacable foe of Germany as was Grey, wrote an important and consequential memorandum dated 1 January 1907 that labeled Germany as Britain's greatest threat, competitor, and enemy. This almost paranoid description of German actions and policies and of the Anglo-German relationship was promoted and widely circulated by Grey as absolute proof of the incorrigible nature of Germany and the need for Britain to steer wide and clear of it. Britain should ally with France to contain Germany for it was only a matter of time before a confrontation would occur.²⁰⁸ With the British Foreign Office controlled by such ardent foes of

²⁰⁵ Berghahn, "Origins," 31.

²⁰⁶ Bönker, "Naval Race between Germany and Great Britain, 1898-1912."

²⁰⁷ Williamson, Jr., "The Way to War," and Clark, *The Sleepwalkers*, 160.

²⁰⁸ Crowe's report may be read at: Eyre Crowe, "Memorandum on the Present State of British Relations with France and Germany," in *British Documents on the Origins of the War 1898-1914: Volume III*, ed. G.P. Gooch and Harold Temperley (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1928), 397-420, and Eyre Crowe, "Appendix 1: The 1907 Memorandum," in *The Crowe Memorandum: Sir Eyre Crowe and Foreign Office Perceptions of Germany, 1918-1925*, by Jeffrey Stephen Dunn (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), 220-28. Crowe's father was British and worked for the Consular service in Germany. Crowe was born and raised in Germany and his mother and wife were both German. Also see Clark, *The Sleepwalkers*, 159-66, and Barth, "Imperialism."

Germany, any type of Anglo-German rapprochement was unlikely and there was little Germany could do to improve that.

It was later in 1907 that the Triple Entente was formed. The Triple Alliance was renewed also and again in 1913. But Germany could put little stock in the agreement as it was fully aware that Austria-Hungary could barely defend itself and that Italy was completely unreliable.²⁰⁹

In October 1908, Austria proclaimed the annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina²¹⁰ which it had occupied since the 1878 Congress of Berlin. Although this seismic event did not directly involve Germany, and Germany had no knowledge of it beforehand,²¹¹ many consequential secondary tremors rattled the *Kaiserreich*.

The Russian ambassador to Austria-Hungary had earlier agreed not to intervene if the Austro-Hungarians annexed Bosnia if the Austro-Hungarians would diplomatically support Russian control of the Bosphorus. That was not publicly known at the time of the annexation.²¹²

Bosnia was about one-half Serbian. Serbia was infuriated that ethnic Serbians were being annexed into the Austro-Hungarian empire and because it had had a covetous eye on Bosnia itself. It threatened war – even mobilizing – and refused to recognize the annexation. Russia supported Bosnia but, having suffered a humiliating and ruinous defeat three years earlier in the Russo-Japanese War and an ensuing revolution, it knew that it could really do very little.

Eventually, the humiliated Russians gave way and recognized the annexation.²¹³ Serbia was

²⁰⁹ Hewitson, *Germany and the Causes*, 177.

²¹⁰ The World War I Document Archive, “The Annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina by Austria-Hungary,” Official Papers, last modified 1 June 2009, https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/The_Annexation_of_Bosnia_and_Herzegovina_by_Austria-Hungary

²¹¹ Geiss, *German Foreign Policy*, 114.

²¹² Clark, *The Sleepwalkers*, 258.

²¹³ Kronenbitter, “Alliance System 1914, and Hewitson, *Germany and the Causes*, 73-74.

therefore also forced to back down, “but both Russia and Serbia wanted racial revenge, swearing they would not back down again the next time.”²¹⁴

The Germans had stood firmly behind its Austrian ally during the crisis. By its cautious actions, Germany had shown that it could conduct successful diplomacy for the interests of it and its allies without resorting to overt violence. Equally true, though, was that neither a majority of the government or of the public – and that included conservative groups – was in favor of any actual military activity to aid the Austria-Hungarians.²¹⁵

Germany was actually quite confident Russia would not offer military help to Serbia during the Annexation Crisis. Schlieffen had reported to Bülow in 1905, after the disastrous Russo-Japanese War, that the Russian army from the officer corps down to the lowest foot soldier were demoralized, poorly trained, and lacked discipline. The 1904-05 war had shown the Russian army to be worse than most thought.²¹⁶

Russian officers blamed their country’s loss in the recent war not to weaknesses and shortcomings in the army overall, but to a lack of proper numbers of troops. Because of this, they were not inclined to make great efforts to alter or modify their approach. And because of that, Schlieffen could only conclude that the Russian army would only become less effective in the future.²¹⁷

This is why, in the Balkan Crisis of 1908-09 and the Balkan Wars of 1912-13 the Germans were confident that the Russian army, even with its pan-Slavic bluster, would never commit to military action.²¹⁸

²¹⁴ Brose, “Arms Race prior to 1914, Armament Policy.”

²¹⁵ Hewitson, *Germany and the Causes*, 74.

²¹⁶ Hewitson, *Germany and the Causes*, 134.

²¹⁷ Hewitson, *Germany and the Causes*, 134.

²¹⁸ Hewitson, *Germany and the Causes*, 135.

But what of the German actions during the Annexation Crisis? Does Germany deserve some of the blame for an event from which one can easily draw a direct line to the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand and the subsequent ignition of the First World War? The Germans certainly did not instigate this situation, yet they supported their ally Austria-Hungary in an action that was ethically ambivalent, at best. They threatened no violence, although Moltke had assured his Austrian counterpart privately that if Austria-Hungary were attacked, Germany would respond militarily.²¹⁹

Erich Brandenburg, the German professor discussed in Chapter One, has an interesting viewpoint. He feels that Germany, only recently fully realizing its precarious position of *Einkreisung*, was concerned about losing its only ally, Austria-Hungary, if it did not convincingly show its support. He comments that:

In view of our increasing isolation, the alliance with Austria remained the last bulwark of our position. The more they observed at Vienna that we feared nothing so much as losing our last ally, the more they sought to exploit the position in order to carry out their own Balkan plans. We dared not refuse to cover the rear for Austria, even when she acted without our sanction and when we disapproved of her course of action. So it was that we protected her in 1908 and 1909 at the time of her advance in Bosnia (of which we disapproved), and thereby we injured our relations with Russia. During the Balkan Wars we occasionally held back, but in important matters we upheld the standpoint of Vienna.²²⁰

Germany found itself tied to an ally of dubious value and with little prospects of any other allies in the future. France and Britain had made clear that they firmly sided with Russia. Britain, in addition, “openly abandoned her commitment to the defense of the Habsburg Monarchy’s role as a Great Power on the Balkan peninsula.”²²¹ Through their support of Russia, France and Britain were tied to Serbia and the rest of the moiling Balkan cauldron. It also bound

²¹⁹ Geiss, *German Foreign Policy*, 115.

²²⁰ Brandenburg, *From Bismarck to the World War*, 517.

²²¹ Kronenbitter, “Alliance System 1914.”

them to any actions Serbia might take just as Germany was bound to the actions of Austria-Hungary.

Oddly, while all the intrigues of the Bosnian Crisis were occurring, France and Germany were agreeing to and signing the Franco-German Accord on Morocco of 9 February 1909. This agreement recognized German economic rights in Morocco and French political and administrative functions and was meant to finally settle the differences over which the dispute in Morocco in 1905 had centered.²²² For the French, this agreement meant nothing as far as the Germans were concerned as they would prove a couple of years later when violating it. Their real purpose in signing it was to discomfort the Spanish with whom they had signed numerous secret agreements over the previous few years designed to make Morocco an exclusively French-Spanish zone.²²³ The French dalliance with the Germans was meant to make the Spanish more malleable as regards any future agreement.

This accord would, two years later, be at the center of another crisis in Morocco, again instigated by France and again raised to the level of international crisis as a result of the theatrics of the German response.

The Second Moroccan Crisis began in May 1911. France used the occasion of turmoil caused by protest of the Sultan's rule to march on the Moroccan city of Fez in an effort directed at establishing itself in definitive control of the country.²²⁴ This move of course broke the 1909 Franco-German Accord, but Spain was convinced that France was colluding with Germany to exclude it from Morocco. Because of this, Spanish troops were sent in June to occupy areas of

²²² Clark, *The Sleepwalkers*, 194-95.

²²³ Delaunay, "Moroccan Crises 1905-1911."

²²⁴ Annika Mombauer, "From Crisis to Crisis: The International Background to Military Planning in the Pre-war Years," in *Helmuth Von Moltke and the Origins of the First World War*, New Studies in European History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 121.

northern and western Morocco.²²⁵ The Germans now reasoned it was they who were being marginalized and excluded from Morocco by France and Spain. They responded by sending a gunboat to the Moroccan port of Agadir.²²⁶ Once again, Germany reacted to a crisis caused by France. It did not begin the crisis itself.

Germany demanded territorial compensation – the French Congo – for France’s contravention of the recently-signed Moroccan accords. France refused; Britain publicly supported her and privately began talks of military cooperation. Both sides escalated the discourse into talk of war. By the fall, the French Chief of the General Staff had had enough and demanded a compromise resolution be found.²²⁷ In the end, Germany was given some mostly worthless tracts in the Congo region and France “received the right to establish a full colonial regime in Morocco.”²²⁸

There were important consequences and outcomes from the Second Moroccan Crisis. Britain firmed up its commitment to France and Russia by pledging to send an expeditionary force of 150,000 men to the continent in support of *La République* in the event of military conflict with the Germans. Britain also agreed to naval pacts with both the Russians and the French.²²⁹ Thus the erstwhile non-military French-British Entente was developing into a true military alliance.

In Germany, the new *Reichskanzler* Bethmann Hollweg began to reconsider arms policies, realizing the naval buildups had taken too much emphasis away from the army. He and

²²⁵ Troy R. E. Paddock, *Contesting the Origins of the First World War: An Historiographical Argument* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2020), 25.

²²⁶ Delaunay, “Moroccan Crises 1905-1911,” and Williamson, Jr., “The Way to War,” Geiss, *German Foreign Policy*, 133. For a more detailed account of the origins of the crisis, see Delaunay, “Moroccan Crises 1905-1911.” The gunboat was sent by the foreign secretary in spite of opposition from the kaiser. See Hewitson, *Germany and the Causes*, 199.

²²⁷ Williamson, Jr., “The Way to War,”

²²⁸ Barth, “Imperialism.” Also see Geiss, *German Foreign Policy*, 135.

²²⁹ McDonough, *The Origins of the First and Second World Wars*, 13.

many others had come to the realization that the army would be far more important than the navy in defending Germany in the event of war and that it was being shortchanged. Demands went out for more troops.²³⁰

Early in 1909, over three years after he had left the *Großer Generalstab*, Alfred von Schlieffen had authored an article in a German journal, the *Deutsche Revue*, which assessed where Germany stood militarily at that moment. In the article, Schlieffen expressed great unease with regard to Germany's geopolitical position and expounded upon factors he found especially disquieting. Foremost were simple numbers. When mobilized, Germany and Austria-Hungary would be able to field only about two-thirds of the numbers of divisions their expected enemies would be capable of fielding. Slightly mitigating this vulnerability was the fact that Russian divisions were of a lower quality than those of the Germans and would mobilize at a slower rate. But German forces would be divided east and west into two separate theatres of operation and into two completely different wars. Schlieffen's answer to these challenges had not changed since his memo of December 1905. He still endorsed a rapid, powerful, strike aimed at quickly knocking out France while holding Russia at bay. The Russians would be dealt with after the war in the west was won.²³¹

By 1909, though, Schlieffen had added an economic element to his argument, *a la* Norman Angell. His call for a quick victory came not only for military reasons. He had become convinced that a protracted war was no longer feasible among states whose very existence depended on unimpeded transnational commercial activity. And he feared that because of

²³⁰ Stein, "Pre-war Military Planning (Germany)."

²³¹ Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive*, 107-08.

Germany's geographic position and her dependence on imports, she would be more affected by the disruption of commerce than her enemies.²³² On this point, he was absolutely correct.

The importance of this article is that it shows the persistence of issues that have plagued Germany for years: a geographic position that makes it more vulnerable than its adversaries, none of whom had to be concerned about a *Zweifrontenkrieg*; a lack of steadfast, quality allies; and a lack of needed troops.

Germany's geography could not be changed. It seemed that no other allies would be forthcoming. But something could be done about the numbers of troops. In 1912-13, two army bills would be passed to address just that.

The attitudes of those in the army officer corps were rapidly changing. Colonel (later General, even later gadfly, polemicist, and political firebrand) Erich Ludendorff began making a strong case to enlarge the army, citing the unstable political environment and the need to be able to strike quickly and with force. Ludendorff urged the halt of recruitment barriers that had impeded the expansion of the army and supported increased funding for a larger army. The Prussian war minister Josias von Heeringen found himself in agreement, feeling Germany was in an increasingly disadvantageous position.²³³

The Reich Treasury soon calculated that Germany could not finance an army large enough to face a two-front war and also the navy Tirpitz wanted. Tirpitz was a double loser in 1911: He not only lost the funding and procurement battle to the army, but he also lost the battleship competition to the British who had (fairly easily) stayed more than a step ahead of him.²³⁴

²³² Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive*, 108.

²³³ Berghahn, "Origins," 31-32.

²³⁴ Berghahn, "Origins," 32.

In early 1912, the Reichstag approved a bill to add 29,000 additional soldiers to the army.²³⁵ This was enough troops for about two new divisions. This number of new troops sounds impressive but, to put it in perspective, the German army lost this number of casualties in less than one week on average throughout the First World War.²³⁶

Attempts were made to put a damper on the naval race between Germany and Britain. In February 1912, the British Lord Chancellor Richard Haldane made a well-intentioned visit to Berlin that unfortunately went nowhere. Other attempts met the same fate as neither side would compromise. Maybe not surprisingly, one of the biggest reasons in both countries was economic. Slowing down the rate of shipbuilding would cost jobs – and votes.²³⁷ It would also give the socialists ammunition in their fight with the status quo.

Part of the emphasis for more troops came from another crisis in the Balkans. This time it was not just rumblings of war, but actual warfare. The Balkan Wars of 1912-13 arose out of the decaying embers of the Ottoman Empire. The first spark erupted in October 1912.

A year earlier, in 1911, Italy had initiated a year-long war with the Turks over Libya.²³⁸ Although they eventually won, the Italians had shown, by struggling against the weak Ottomans, that they lacked great military power. Worse, Italy's actions further destabilized the environment in Europe, especially in the perennially volatile Balkans, and the First Balkan War quickly ensued because of it.²³⁹ Many of the small Balkan countries saw a chance to rid themselves of the overarching influence of Turkey, whose army had proven it was even less capable than the hapless Italians.

²³⁵ Berghahn, "Origins," 32.

²³⁶ Robert Weldon Whalen, "War Losses (Germany)," 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. Ute Daniel et al., Freie Universität Berlin, last modified 8 Oct 2014, DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.10460.

²³⁷ Hastings, *Catastrophe 1914*, 7, and Bönker, "Naval Race between Germany and Great Britain, 1898-1912."

²³⁸ Germany worked to prevent the Italian aggression to no avail. See Clark, *The Sleepwalkers*, 249.

²³⁹ Brose, "Arms Race Prior to 1914, Armament Policy."

The first war pitted the recently formed and Serbian-led Balkan League (Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece, and Montenegro) against the Ottomans in an attempt to drive the Turks out of the Balkans. The League was quickly successful in its objective, but soon dissolved into acrimonious debate over the division of territory gained from the Ottomans and so a second war broke out in June 1913.²⁴⁰

With the Balkans aflame right on Austria-Hungary's doorstep and its Bosnian territory being threatened, the Dual Monarchy was justifiably nervous. Germany acted to restrain it, doing so in the knowledge that the German military was not yet properly prepared to become enmeshed in extensive operations of the type that a reckless and incautious Austria-Hungary would quickly draw it into.²⁴¹

The end result of the Balkan Wars was an almost Ottoman-free Europe. Serbia, whom Russia had again disappointed, was much enlarged in size and in much stronger strategic position vis-à-vis Austria-Hungary, as regards Bosnia-Herzegovina. On a short German tether, Austria-Hungary had been seen as weak in its response to the wars.²⁴² Germany, who had prevented Austria-Hungary from involving itself in a war that was only tangential to German concerns, was thereafter drawn into a much more critical role in relation to its one true, but less-than-stable, ally. In addition, as alluded to above, the wars were an impetus for Germany to raise the size of its standing army. The army bill of 1913 did so in much greater fashion than the last bill in 1912, despite *Reichskanzler* Bethmann Hollweg's apprehensions about finances.²⁴³ Lastly,

²⁴⁰ McDonough, *The Origins of the First and Second World Wars*, 13.

²⁴¹ Hastings, *Catastrophe 1914*, 57.

²⁴² Kershaw, *To Hell and Back*, 27.

²⁴³ Jean-Jacques Becker, "Heads of State and Government," in *The Cambridge History of the First World War*, Vol. 2, *The State*, ed. Jay Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 16.

a helpful outcome for Germany was that, in a rare correspondence of views, both the German right and left were pleased their leaders had kept them out of the war.²⁴⁴

While working to keep as much of a lid as possible on the Balkan stewpot, the German leaders experienced an unsettling moment at home. In December 1912, *Reichskanzler* Bethmann Hollweg had given an only thinly veiled warning to the Russians not to pre-emptively attack Austria-Hungary in connection to the wars in the Balkans or Germany would have to help defend its ally. The British then warned Germany that should Germany defend Austria-Hungary in an attack by Russia, the British would militarily support Russia. The British, whose goal was to separate Germany from the interests of Austria-Hungary, were inserting themselves in a conflict halfway across a continent that did not directly involve them.²⁴⁵

Many things can be taken from this exchange. First, it can be assumed that France was also involved here as Britain did not have an army capable of anything like what it was suggesting. The German ambassador in Great Britain had just been informed by a subordinate of Edward Grey that the British were committed to the defense of France in the event of a Franco-German conflict.²⁴⁶ Second, this shows the depth of the relationships in the Triple Entente partners and how the coalition had evolved from simple *détente* into a manifestly military alliance. Third, it shows a certain presumptuous haughtiness upon which elaboration is unnecessary. Fourth, such action could only engender deepening German sensations of *Einkreisung*.

It was these intensifying feelings of encirclement that led Wilhelm to call a now-famous emergency meeting, the so-called ‘Council of War’ of 8 December 1912. A number of scholars –

²⁴⁴ Hewitson, *Germany and the Causes*, 75.

²⁴⁵ Mommsen, “The Topos of Inevitable War,” 33.

²⁴⁶ German History in Documents and Images, “The ‘War Council’ (December 1912),” Wilhelmine Germany and the First World War (1890-1918), https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=799

notably Fritz Fischer— consider this meeting to be that in which Germany took a decision to incite a world war. That judgment is nonsensical. There certainly was much blustering talk, even a deeply-felt pronouncement from Moltke that the German position was worsening and it would be best if war came ‘the sooner, the better.’²⁴⁷ But none of the other attendees wished for a war in the near future, especially Tirpitz, who still nourished dreams of near-naval parity with the British, and was well aware that war would bring his battleship program to an immediate halt. These military leaders were not conspiring to start a war, they were “assessing Germany’s strategic position”²⁴⁸ after the dull, aching realization that the other significant Great Powers were lined up against and *around* them. The only substantive plan to come from this meeting was, as discussed in Chapter Three, to conduct the soon-forgotten press campaign meant to build support for the ‘inevitable’ war.²⁴⁹

Moltke produced a memorandum in late December 1912 to analyze where Germany stood at that point. In this memorandum, Moltke described the unappealing position of Germany in the world of the alliance systems. He wrote that the Triple Alliance, as a purely defensive organization, would only act to draw Germany into wars in which it has no vital interests. Conversely, the Triple Entente had “marked offensive tendencies.” For this reason, Russia would be prone to attempt “the overthrow of Austria,” France wished “to recover her lost provinces and take her revenge for the defeats of 1870,” and “England wants the help of her allies to rid her of the nightmare of German sea-power.” Germany, he wrote, “only desires to

²⁴⁷ Berghahn, “Origins,” 34, and Mommsen, “The Topos of Inevitable War,” 33. Moltke tempered his actual remark: “I consider a war inevitable—the sooner, the better. But we should do a better job of gaining popular support for a war against Russia, in line with the Kaiser’s remarks.” He was not calling for war, only acknowledging the predicament in which Germany found itself. See German History in Documents and Images, “The ‘War Council’ (December 1912).”

²⁴⁸ Williamson, Jr., Samuel R. “The Way to War.”

²⁴⁹ German History in Documents and Images, “The ‘War Council’ (December 1912).”

retain her possessions” and “is not thinking of destroying the English fleet: here again she only wishes to defend herself.”²⁵⁰

Moltke’s conclusion is that the German military forces needed to be expanded and that all Germans must be prepared to make sacrifices like their neighboring state, France, which “calls up 82 percent of her available men for service in the army; Germany between 52 and 54 percent.”²⁵¹

Thereafter, Moltke, who had possessed a typical Prussian reluctance at widespread conscription, endorsed expansion of personnel and a parallel buildup of weaponry. The spectre of the *Volkskrieg* and *Langer Kampf* haunted him as did thoughts of *guerre à outrance*.²⁵²

As opposed to the previous year’s increase of 29,000 soldiers, the 1913 army bill would add 136,000 men to create an active-duty peacetime force of 890,000.²⁵³ Full conscription as demanded by Erich Ludendorff and endorsed by Moltke was not included in the legislation, though.²⁵⁴

France immediately reacted by passing the Three-Year Law, which increased the term of enlistment for draftees from two to three years. France already called up almost every eligible man. Now conscripts would stay in service a longer time. This change resulted in a much larger standing army for the French from the same population of eligible conscripts.²⁵⁵

²⁵⁰ Helmut von. Moltke, “The Memorandum Of December, 1912,” in *The General Staff and its Problems; the History of the Relations between the High Command and the German Imperial Government as Revealed by Official Documents, Vol. 2*, by Erich Ludendorff, trans. F. A. Holt (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1920), 60-61. Also see Sidney B. Fay, “New Light on the Origins of the World War, I. Berlin and Vienna, to July 29,” *The American Historical Review* 25 no. 4 (July 1920): 621.

²⁵¹ Moltke, “The Memorandum Of December, 1912,” 65-66.

²⁵² Stein, “Pre-war Military Planning (Germany).”

²⁵³ Clark, *The Sleepwalkers*, 331.

²⁵⁴ Hewitson, *Germany and the Causes*, 127.

²⁵⁵ Becker, “Heads of State and Government,” 16. Also see M. Jules Cambon, French Ambassador in Berlin, to M. Jonnart, Minister for Foreign Affairs, March 17, 1913, in *The French Yellow Book: How Germany Forced the War*, French Ministère des Affaires Étrangères (London: Harrison and Sons, 1915), 1. After the institution of the French Three-Year Law, the Germans reacted by calling for further increases for themselves. In this note to the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Cambon denied any French responsibility for the constant tit-for-tat between the

It should be noted that Germany was not trying to outdistance its adversaries in numbers of active-duty personnel. Against the combined armies of France and Russia that would have been impossible. Germany was merely trying to buttress what it knew to be a continually deteriorating position in a world that seemed daily to encroach a bit further.

French and the Germans, stating that the French moves were only responses to previous provocative German initiatives.

Concluding Remarks

“*Zum Rhein, zum Rhein, zum deutschen Rhein, wer will des Stromes Hüter sein?*”
 (“To the Rhine, to the Rhine, to the German Rhine, who wants to be the river’s guardian?”)

A patriotic song consistently popular throughout the duration of the German Empire was “*Die Wacht am Rhein*.”¹ In the first stanza, the song poses the question above. This encapsulates the objective of the German Empire during the *Zweites Reich*, constant vigilance and protection of *das Vaterland*, not to act in aggression toward its neighbors. Its message is reminiscent of the American Revolutionary era axiom, “Eternal vigilance is the price of freedom.”

In the introduction of this paper, it was stated that the purpose of the paper was “to ascertain whether or not Imperial Germany comported itself appropriately in its geopolitical activities in the years prior to the First World War... (and) whether the stances and decisions taken by Germany were in any way in contravention to proper statesmanlike conduct, deviating from what would be considered customary or conventional as compared to other European countries.” The object of that was to “analyze those events as agents of causation... (of) creating an environment likely to engender confrontation and possibly warfare.”

It was also stated that “this limited approach cannot be construed as to be able to make a full determination as to Germany’s culpability for the Great War.” The events of the *Julikrisis* are not considered here.

The stated thesis of this paper was that “the geopolitical actions of the German Empire... were completely in line with the geopolitical actions of other large European states...and directed at protecting the encircled German state, not at aggression towards other countries.”

¹ The song lyrics for “*Die Wacht am Rhein*” (“the Watch on the Rhine”) were written as a poem by Max Schneckenburger in 1840 and set to music in 1854 by Karl Wilhelm. See Hans A. Pohlsander, *National Monuments and Nationalism in 19th Century Germany* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2011), 70.

This conclusion asserts that the thesis as stated is correct.

It must be understood that this does not mean that the actions of the German Empire were without blemish and at all times the best that could have been taken. This paper does not show that, and this conclusion does not assert that. What the paper does show is that the actions of the German Empire were no more impeachable than were those of its neighboring countries. All the Great Powers acted in ways that together created a geopolitical environment in which warfare became increasingly likely. All the Great Powers conducted policies of brinkmanship. All the Great Powers entwined themselves in webs of alliances that made war more likely, not less. The *Kaiserreich* bears no special culpability for the war as a result of its pre-war geopolitical actions.

This paper does not assert that Germany bears no part in the totality of blame for the causation of the First World War. It renders no judgment on the actions of Germany or any other state for its conduct during the July Crisis.

The organizational model used was a DIMES model. To review, this investigative and analytic model incorporates the aspects and influences of Diplomacy, Information, the Military, Economics, and the Social environment, the accepted four basic instruments of national power and the added social aspect.² This model works especially well in providing structure to the discussion of issues of such great geopolitical import as German actions during the years prior to the First World War.

There are other models and methods one may use for analysis. One may add components to the mix such as Political, Environmental, Demographics, Legal, and Technological and then choose whichever components work most appropriately for the analysis being pursued. The acronymic title of these models – DIME, DIMES, DIMPLES, PEST, PESTLE, SLEEP – really

² Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Doctrine Note 1-18- Strategy* (Washington, D.C.: Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Publications, 25 April 2018) https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/jdn_jg/jdn1_18.pdf, vii.

mean nothing other than being a quick way to list the contours of one's analytic method. This paper used DIMES because the author considered that combination most appropriate to its task. Other possibly useful elements listed above were either included within the components chosen (technological, demographics, political, legal) or were considered insignificant (environmental).

Another analytic tool, ASCOPE, may be used with DIMES to provide further differentiation of the DIMES components. ASCOPE evaluates the considerations of areas, structures, capabilities, organization, people and events.³ Significant components of ASCOPE were considered under each DIMES heading. For example, within the geopolitical components (D and M), *areas* were extensively discussed, most notably the geographic position of Germany in Central Europe where it abutted potentially adversarial territories on both the east and the west. The concept of areas was also important economically due to colonization. *Capabilities* are especially significant when considering the geopolitical (military strength and diplomatic effectiveness), the economy (productivity), and information (literacy rate, newspaper coverage and freedom of the press). Important *organizations* were noted above. These included the nationalist leagues (Pan-German League, Navy League, and Army League), the military, the Great General Staff, and the Prussian War Ministry. *People* and *events* were of obvious importance to each DIMES component.

The causes of the First World War may be divided into long-term causes versus short-term causes. Long-term causes of the war include the socioeconomic environment, militarism, nationalism, imperialism/colonialism, and geopolitical activity (diplomatic and military). Short-term causes are actions in the weeks directly leading up to the outbreak of war, from the time of

³ Thorsten Kodalle et al., "A General Theory of Influence in a DIME/PMESII/ASCOP/IRC2 Model," *Journal of Information Warfare* 19, no. 2 (2020): 18.

Archduke Ferdinand's assassination until the beginning of war. That was the time of the July Crisis, the *Julikrisis*. That is not the focus of this paper.

This concluding segment will briefly review the place of the German Empire within those long-term causes and describe overarching concepts which may be derived from this paper.

Economics overall was a force for peace. Most countries did not wish to disturb the growing world markets. But economic rivalry did create some unease, especially in Britain. Because the German economy was growing at such a rapid pace, it threatened to quickly eclipse that of Britain in the world economic order.

As was noted above, Bismarck was quite reluctant to embark upon a course towards colonialism, thinking it far more trouble than it was worth. When the Germans did eventually develop colonies, it was in a minor way and certainly was not an important cause of the war, playing only a small role in "the rising tensions between the European Great Powers prior to the First World War."⁴

The two Moroccan crises may be said to be related to colonialism. Neither of these led to war and both were precipitated by illicit French actions. More will be said below, but at this point one significant consequence of these crises should be understood. Germany rightfully concluded that reliance on international conclaves to settle disputes involving them only resulted in the isolation and ill-treatment of them and of Austria-Hungary. Hence the reluctance of Germany and Austria-Hungary as to participation in any type of Great Power conference to resolve issues during the *Julikrisis*.

The social environment of the German Empire was little different from that of the other Great Powers. The degenerative nature of the *Fin de Siècle* was felt across all the Western World

⁴ Boris Barth, "Imperialism," 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. Ute Daniel et al., Freie Universität Berlin, last modified 4 Mar 2015, DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.10567.

from Europe to the Americas as was the unsettling aspect of the industrial revolutions. Modern anti-western ideologies percolated to the surface across most of post-enlightenment Europe, especially the uniquely destructive forces of socialism, communism, and social Darwinism.

Germany was no different in this respect. The German leaders found themselves walking a tight line between the forces of socialism and militarism. They were, for the most part, successful in keeping a lid on socialist revolution and, at the same time, controlling and harnessing the energy of militarism.

During every major crisis of the German Empire prior to the First World War, members of the general staff had called for preemptive strikes against adversaries. Whether it be against France during the War-In-Sight Crisis or during the two Moroccan crises or against Russia in 1887 or 1912, generals called for war but were denied by civilian leaders.

As a whole, during the latter German Empire, even though “military language, uniforms and symbols had to a large degree conquered civilian society...these symbols meant different things to different people,” and militarism overall did not translate into great influence on policy.⁵

Regardless of what definition one might employ for the term ‘militarism,’ Germany was certainly not the most militarist society in pre-First World War Europe. That designation would go to Serbia whose king, Peter I, had been installed by a military coup and whose society and military were under the undue influence of the cultish paramilitary society *Ujedinjenje ili smrt* (*Unification or Death* – the *Black Hand*). By contrast, in Germany, the kaiser and the military were often stymied in their efforts to increase military spending by a Reichstag rife with Social

⁵ Christian K. Melby, “Militarism,” 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. Ute Daniel et al., Freie Universität Berlin, last modified 17 Nov 2020, DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.11495

Democrats often bent on procuring funds for social spending as opposed to outlays for the military.

The military was a significant influence in pre-1914 Germany, but it was not the preponderant factor so often made of it.

The naval arms race has often been cited as an important provocation during the pre-war years. Germany had two goals for its naval competition with England. The foremost was defensive. In 1807, England had destroyed the Danish fleet moored near Copenhagen in a surprise attack. The Germans wished to avoid being *Copenhagenized* themselves.⁶ To avoid such a fate, a much larger and more powerful navy was required.⁷ The second aim of the naval buildup was directed outside Europe to the wider world in a bid at protecting colonial enterprises of German business and to project German power for their program of *Weltpolitik*.

As was noted in the previous chapter, the naval buildup actually made a contribution to the fostering of peace. The navy knew that it needed about twenty years of calm to achieve any sort of parity with the British that would enable the proper defense of the northern German shore and naval assets in the Baltic Sea. During that time, war must be avoided. In addition, as discussed above, the German navy was a less bellicose organization than was the *Reichsheer*. Emphasis on the *Kaiserliche Marine* lowered the overall temperature.⁸

One wonders why it might be considered inappropriate or provocative for Germany to build a navy capable of defending its interests against other world powers? In 1898, at the beginning of the period of *Weltpolitik* and German naval expansion, Germany possessed nine

⁶ The British attacked the Danish Fleet to prevent Napoleon from gaining use of it. See Volker R. Berghahn, "Origins," in *The Cambridge History of the First World War*, Vol. 1, *Global War*, ed. Jay Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 28.

⁷ The German fear of being *Copenhagenized* was not irrational. Note that during the First Moroccan Crisis, the British admiral Sir John Fisher considered recommending a preemptive attack on the German fleet. See Williamson, Jr., "The Way to War."

⁸ Mark Hewitson, *Germany and the Causes of the First World War* (Oxford, UK: Berg, 2004), 115.

large naval vessels. Britain had seventy-four large ocean-going ships and France fifty-two.⁹ For what reason must Germany always remain in an inferior naval position *vis-à-vis* Great Britain and France? Did these other countries possess an exclusive right to the world's stage? Was Germany to simply resign itself to existence as a second-rate power? Was Germany just to sit back and avoid any type of friction even if it were to be left behind in an expanding world economy? It seems the French considered the newly unified Germans as *arrivistes* and *parvenus*; to the British they were upstarts.¹⁰

The strategy of *Weltpolitik* and the goal of *Weltmacht* undergirded by the naval buildup were not fanciful or unfeasible ideas. With the rapid growth of the German population, economy, industrial base, and military power, it was not unrealistic to think that Germany might, in not-so-distant decades, achieve a position at the acme of world power. Germany's effort and determination to position itself on the world's stage was not the problem. The problem was the response to those efforts from Britain and especially France.

France was particularly at fault in each of the Moroccan Crises as both were precipitated by its breaking of international agreements. In the first instance, Britain had given it leave to do so because France had given Britain free rein in Egypt. In the second instance, France again took advantage. Both times it wagered that it would not be called on its actions. Both times it wagered incorrectly. Berlin had legitimate concerns in Morocco as to trading rights and control of the Straits of Gibraltar. As noted above, Germany's response was not the best it could have been, but it had every right to protest France's behavior which was far more destabilizing than that of Germany.

⁹ Hewitson, *Germany and the Causes*, 115.

¹⁰ The term *upstart* has a long pedigree in Britain for someone who is considered not to deserve his 'place in the sun.' William Shakespeare was termed an "upstart crow" by a jealous competitor (Robert Greene) when he burst onto the theatrical scene in London.

In Germany, the forces of nationalism exerted a moderate influence on policy mainly through the workings of the patriotic leagues. These leagues promoted a strong defensive stance on the continent and expansion out into the world through the support of *Weltpolitik* and colonialism. In France, nationalism took on the mantle of *revanchisme*, the desire to recover the territories of Alsace and Lorraine. But it was in the Slavic areas that nationalism took on its most troubling nature through the pan-Slavic movement that caused constant turmoil throughout southeastern Europe and especially in the Balkans. This is where the military conflict that would become the First World War began in the form of the First and Second Balkan Wars.

France and Britain stirred themselves into this simmering Balkan cauldron through their alliances with Russia not unlike Germany did through its alliance with Austria-Hungary.

The importance of the alliance system in pre-war Europe cannot be overstated. The alliance system, in theory a deterrent to war, became in practice a near-guarantor of war. It could entwine the fortunes and actions of countries that may be of very different political ideology (republican France and autocratic Russia). It could bond a country to another that took sudden, volatile decisions (Germany and Austria-Hungary, as exemplified by the Bosnian annexation). The alliance system reduced the elasticity and increased the rigidity of the diplomatic state of affairs, limiting the range of responses possible to avert a crisis. When war erupted, the alliance system assured that the war would be general and not localized.

And it is only to be expected that Germany would begin to feel encircled because of the alliance system which attempted to surround and isolate it. And because of that, the Germans felt “duty bound, for the sake of self-preservation, to work steadily at the same time toward

building up our army and navy for purposes of defense, because of the central location of Germany and her open, unprotected frontiers.”¹¹

After German unification, France and Russia especially felt threatened by the presence of a large, well-ordered state between them. But did Germany not have the right, as did all states, to establish itself on the world stage? France and Russia obviously liked not having another competitor, but they certainly had no entitlement to that.

All systems must have an input of energy to sustain them and their underlying structure. The energy that sustained the system of alliances prior to the First World War was extracted from fear, a very negative source of energy. As Ian Kershaw explains:

Germany feared encirclement by its enemies, France and Russia. It especially feared Russia and the consequences of the military might of the Tsarist regime overtaking its own...Russia in turn feared German control over the Balkans, the Near East, and over its crucial economic lifeline through the Bosphorus. France, invaded by Prussia only a little over forty years earlier...harboured an almost paranoid fear of Germany. Britain feared the loss of its commercial dominance... German supremacy in Europe (and) German control of the Belgian and French coast, just across the Channel...Fear drove the arms race.¹²

There were some good outcomes of the alliance system, though. Because it bonded nations together, it could provide some predictability during interstate conflicts because of those bonds. A functioning alliance could also restrain adverse actions of one of the members through the intervention of others, as Germany restrained Austria-Hungary during the Balkan Wars.

The historian Sidney Bradshaw Fay placed the blame for the war squarely on the shoulders of the alliance system, stating in the first volume of his 1928 study, *The Origins of the World War*, that “the greatest single underlying cause of the War was the system of secret

¹¹ Wilhelm II, *My Memoirs: 1888-1918*, Trans. Thomas Russell Yabarra (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1922) 128.

¹² Ian Kershaw, *To Hell and Back: Europe 1914-1949* (New York: Penguin Books, 2015), 37.

alliances which developed after the Franco-Prussian War.”¹³ Fay also blames what he refers to as “domestic unfaithfulness” in adding “uncertainty and worry” into the mix, making for an unstable situation in which no one really knew if its alliance partners would truly stand with it.¹⁴ And, to further roil the waters, Fay made the observation that alliances, originally defensive in nature and, in the case of the Entente, even originally non-military, “tended to become widened in scope to cover policies involving offensive military action.”¹⁵

But can the alliance system really be blamed? It is an inanimate, immaterial object. Blaming the alliance system is like blaming the gun for the shooting, the automobile for the accident, or the hammer for the blackened nail. The fault belongs to men. It belongs to most of the European leaders in the years before the First World War. It belongs to those who practiced brinkmanship, those who nursed an implacable antipathy towards their neighboring countries, and those who welcomed a cleansing war to wipe clean the European slate.

The pre-war environment produced a set of circumstances for which Germany bears no exceptional accountability: the alliance system, the instability of the Balkans, the containment policies of Germany’s neighbors, the development of a cult of the offensive, and the feeling of the inevitability of war that became a self-fulfilling prophecy. Germany behaved no differently than did other Great Powers at the same time.

But there was one difference. Germany lost the war. And because of that, Germany was presented with a totality of blame that should have been shared far more widely and much more equitably.

Finis

¹³ Sidney Bradshaw Fay, *The Origins of the World War*, Vol. 1 (New York: Macmillan Co, 1928), 34.

¹⁴ Fay, *The Origins of the World War*, Vol. 1, 225. Fay specifically mentions the Italians because of their dalliances with France in 1902 and Russia in 1909.

¹⁵ Fay, *The Origins of the World War*, Vol. 1, 224.

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