

## GERMANY AND THE FIRST WORLD WAR

### How and why did Germany's rulers plunge it into war?

Article 231 of the Treaty of Versailles (1919) blamed Germany, and its allies to a lesser degree, for causing the First World War. To the German public that was the most objectionable clause in the treaty. Not only were they convinced that the accusation was untrue, but the 'guilt clause' was felt to dishonour the men – fathers, brothers, sons – who lost their lives or suffered dreadful injuries while fighting for the Fatherland in the First World War.

When in 1961 Professor Fritz Fischer published his book *Griff nach der Weltmacht*, he inevitably created a storm of controversy. He argued that Germany's rulers had deliberately provoked the outbreak of the First World War, and that they did so primarily for domestic political reasons, and not simply because of the threatening international circumstances Germany found itself in before the war. Subsequent research has confirmed this core of Fischer's thesis, and it is now the most widely accepted interpretation of the causes of the First World War.

### Internal tensions

In contemporary German interpretations of the causes of the First World War great significance is ascribed to the internal political tensions which beset Imperial Germany. They are seen as the main reason for Kaiser Wilhelm II's government pursuing aggressive foreign policies which did so much to create the pre-conditions for a world war, and they are also held to have predisposed Germany's elites to make the fateful decision to provoke war in 1914.

From its inception in 1871 the German Empire was ruled by an autocratic kaiser, and governed through an aristocratic landlord elite. The kaiser was head of the German armed forces, had the exclusive right to commit Germany to peace or war, and to define the empire's foreign policies. Kaiser Wilhelm II (1890–1918) was determined to keep his great powers undiminished. He was horrified by the thought of becoming a powerless constitutional monarch like his grandmother, Britain's Queen Victoria.

The German aristocracy – personified by the backward-looking Prussian Junkers – staffed the imperial court, and enjoyed a virtual monopoly of all the senior positions in the imperial government, in the army, the judiciary, and the civil service. The aristocratic elite, and their allies among the great capitalists, used their positions

of power in Imperial Germany to try to preserve their high status and their economic and political privileges.

The German people participated in the political system by electing members to the Reichstag, or Imperial parliament, on a universal suffrage. The German government, however, was responsible to the kaiser and not to the Reichstag. Yet the Reichstag could not be ignored. The government needed the Reichstag's approval of its annual budget (taxation and spending plans), and for new legislation to become law. If the Reichstag did not support the Reich Chancellor and other ministers, the government of Germany could be paralysed.

By the 1890s Germany's political system seemed to be heading towards crisis. The kaiser and the aristocracy were as determined as ever to preserve their powers and privileges and to make no concessions to those who demanded change. Yet the rapid industrialisation and urbanisation of German society since 1871 magnified the pressures for change.

The middle class had grown tremendously in numbers and confidence, and were asserting their right to political power through a stronger Reichstag. The working class too had burgeoned in size, and the Social Democratic Party was trying to mobilise the workers to demand not only a share of political power, but also a more equitable share of Germany's wealth. Kaiser Wilhelm II and the aristocrats looked anxiously for a solution to the twin 'evils' of middle-class parliamentarianism and working-class socialism.

### 'Weltpolitik'

Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz, head of the German Naval Office, persuaded Kaiser Wilhelm II that Germany should grasp at 'world power' in order to arouse such patriotism among the German people as would overwhelm the pressures for political change within Germany. Chancellor Bismarck (1871–90), the architect of German unification, had set a precedent in 1866 by using a 'short, patriotic war' to neutralise the pressures for constitutional reforms in Prussia. Tirpitz promised to emulate Bismarck's success, on a grander scale.

Tirpitz's plan to achieve 'world power' was simple. Germany would build a navy about two-thirds the size of the British navy, which was then the largest in the world. Tirpitz did not intend the German navy to actually fight the British navy, but to intimidate Britain into allowing Germany to acquire its own sizeable empire overseas. Tirpitz's strategy has been designated the 'risk theory': it was based on the assumption

that Britain would not risk a naval battle with a large German fleet for fear of losing too many ships, and leaving the far-flung empire vulnerable to the predatory attentions of other great powers, like France or Russia.

The German Naval Laws of 1898 and 1900 did not openly challenge the British navy, as Tirpitz considered that such a challenge would be too dangerous until the German navy was large enough to defend itself. Nonetheless, the British Admiralty could not fail to recognise the threat posed to it by the massive battle fleet being built by the Germans.

To address the German challenge the British concluded important treaties with Japan (1902), France (1904) and Russia (1907) to reduce the threats to its distant colonies, and to allow them to concentrate their warships in the North Sea, facing Germany.

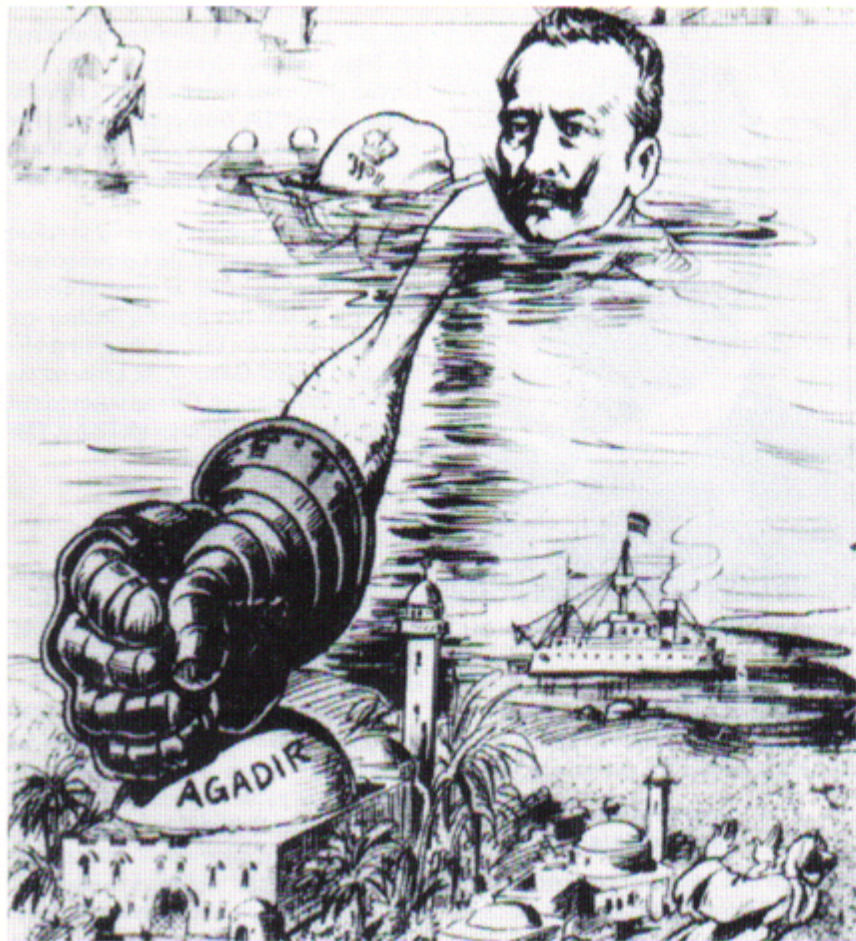
From 1906 the British navy began to build a new and most powerful battleship – the *dreadnought*. Once the Germans followed suit, a highly visible naval arms race took place between Britain and Germany. Tensions were raised high as the governments of the two countries used the media to persuade their peoples of the need for higher taxation to finance the massive arms race.

Ultimately though, Germany could not afford to build an enormous navy as well as financing Europe's greatest army. Britain had a smaller army, and was able to devote most of the defence budget to the navy. The British public was determined to maintain their empire's enormous naval supremacy in order to preserve Britain's status as the world's premier 'power'. Hence, the British made a supreme effort to win the naval race, and by 1912 it was clear to all that they had succeeded in doing so.

German efforts to break Britain's *entente cordiale* with France and acquire overseas colonies, by intervening in Morocco in 1905 and 1911, proved counter-productive. Germany failed to gain significant colonies. Worse than that, their interference in Morocco only served to strengthen the *entente*. In fact, after the 1911 Moroccan crisis, Britain signed a naval pact with France and began to negotiate one with Russia.

By 1912 Germany's *Weltpolitik* had clearly failed. The Germans had lost the naval arms race they had started, and Germany was no nearer to being a 'world power'. On the contrary, the country was now 'encircled' by a Triple Entente, comprised of Britain, France and Russia, which German aggressive policies had done much to create. Most worryingly of all, the failure to achieve 'world power', and the question of who should pay for the arms race, had exacerbated political tensions within Germany.





The mailed fist at Agadir: a German cartoon of Kaiser Wilhelm's arrogant intervention.

### 'Mitteleuropa'

After Germany's failure to achieve 'world-power' status Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg decided to end the naval race and to try to improve relations with Britain. However, the kaiser would not allow the chancellor to make concessions to those who demanded constitutional reforms in the Reichstag. Hence the chancellor had to continue with the now traditional strategy of pursuing an aggressive foreign policy to unite the German conservatives. With the abandonment of *Weltpolitik* the German elites looked to south-eastern Europe for an easier 'outlet' for expansion.

The concept of *Mitteleuropa* embraced all of central Europe, including the minor states in the Balkans and even the ailing Ottoman empire. Some conservatives dreamed of a German hegemony extending from Berlin as far as Baghdad. From this enormous power base Germany could advance to world power at some later stage.

Involvement in the Balkans, though, was highly dangerous. It was an unstable region in which Russia and Austria-Hungary had competing ambitions, and fears of the other. German involvement in the Balkans was bound to arouse Russian fears and hostility. Russia sponsored a Balkan League in May 1912 to unite the Balkan states against Austro-German ambitions. But in October 1912 the Balkan League attacked the Ottoman empire and expelled the Turks from all of Europe except for Constantinople. The Second

Balkan War in July 1913 saw Serbia become the most powerful nation-state in the Balkans.

For Austria-Hungary the two Balkan wars posed a great problem. Slavic nationalism had demonstrated its lethal power. The multinational Austro-Hungarian Empire felt vulnerable to a Serb-led Balkan League, backed by Russia, working with the Slavs within the empire to destroy it.

From 1912 the Austro-Hungarian military command sought to crush the latent threat posed by Serbia. However, military action against Serbia would prompt Russian intervention and Austria-Hungary would not risk war with Russia without an assurance of German support. Before the summer of 1914 the Germans were not prepared to commit themselves to a European war.

Even after the second Balkan War the German government hoped to expand its influence in the Balkans by economic and diplomatic means. Success seemed close in October 1913 when the Turkish government concluded a military agreement with Germany. The Germans sent Lt. Gen. Liman von Sanders to Constantinople to help reform the Turkish army. The kaiser and his government hoped to 'Germanize' Turkey.

However, Russia feared German influence on Constantinople. One third of Russian exports passed through the Bosphorous straits, and Russia's economic well-being could be jeopardised by German control over the straits. Hence Russia mobilised the Triple Entente to contain

the German threat. Britain and France supported Russia. They were motivated not simply by a desire to preserve their alliance. First and foremost they were anxious to prevent Germany from dominating Europe. In January 1914 the Germans were forced to back down.

Following the public humiliations Germany had suffered after both of the Moroccan crises, and German failure in the naval race, the latest setback in Turkey sparked off a tremendous outcry in the Reichstag and in the German press. The prestige of the monarchy and the armed forces was much reduced in the German public's esteem. Germany's aggressive foreign policies were having exactly the opposite effect to that intended by the kaiser and his aristocratic entourage.

### Internal paralysis

Foreign policy setbacks undermined the confidence of the German elites, and weakened their position within Germany. In the general election of 1912 the SPD won 35% of the seats, making it the largest party in the Reichstag. It seemed to many of the elites that there was an inexorable tide in favour of socialism, and the kaiser's government was powerless to reverse it.

In 1913 the SPD joined with the Centre and liberal parties in the Reichstag to impose capital gains taxes on the wealthy aristocrats and capitalists. The conservatives, the party which best represented the views of the elites, mustered only 63 votes in the Reichstag, compared with the 280 votes of the other parties in favour of the taxes. It was the first time that the Reichstag had voted against the privileges of the German elites, and the scale of their defeat sent the conservatives reeling.

In January 1914 the Reichstag passed a vote of no confidence in Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg over the Zabern Affair. The affair arose because of a minor incident in Alsace, but the German military commanders over-reacted and it became an issue which directly affected the prestige of the army, and the government of the empire. By passing their motion of no confidence the members of the Reichstag criticised not simply the Reich Chancellor, and the military commanders, but also the kaiser who was ultimately responsible for the government and the army.

The kaiser maintained Bethmann-Hollweg in power, despite the Reichstag's vote. However, the kaiser, and the aristocratic elites through whom he governed, could not fail to be alarmed by the trend of events within Germany. The Reichstag was growing more openly critical of the political status quo. It was becoming more loudly insistent on constitutional and fiscal reform.

The kaiser and the ruling elite were as determined as ever to resist change. Yet they were convinced that drastic action was needed to reverse the steady erosion of their position in the



empire. Some conservatives contemplated a *Staatstreich*, a military take-over, but those with greater sanity realised that would probably provoke a civil war, and leave Germany open to foreign attacks. The only other possibility, given their refusal to make political concessions, seemed to be a 'short, patriotic war' to revive popular support for the monarchy and preserve the old political order.

### Military calculations

By 1912 the German army chiefs had decided that their army had to be expanded in size. The 'encirclement' of Germany by the Triple Entente was a threat they could not ignore. Yet it was the success of the first Balkan League in destroying the Ottoman Empire in Europe which created a sense of urgency in Berlin.

The Germans knew that the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1912 left Austria-Hungary vulnerable to attack from any future Balkan League. This threatened not only German ambitions to dominate *Mitteleuropa* but, more fundamentally, it weakened a key assumption of the Schlieffen Plan. General von Schlieffen's plan was designed to guarantee German success in a war fought against France and Russia simultaneously. It was predicated on the assumption that the Austro-Hungarian army would engage and block the Russian army while the Germans conquered France, before turning east to defeat the Russians. The weakening of Austria-Hungary undermined Germany's chances of success in a European war.

To counter this danger Moltke, the Chief of the German general staff, had the kaiser and German government agree to a 30% increase in the size of the Germany army, with further plans to raise its numbers to 750,000 troops. The Reichstag was persuaded to sanction this massive increase in June 1913 by means of a tremendous government-sponsored press campaign against the 'Slavic threat'.

Not for the first time, the German government failed to take account of the likely response of the other great powers to these actions. The Triple Entente perceived the German military increases as a grave threat to peace. France responded by increasing the period of military service for conscripts from two to three years, giving France an army of 700,000 men. The British made plans to create an expeditionary force to support France in the event of a European war. The Russians adopted a Four Year Plan to increase the size of their army to 1,750,000 men! They planned to bring their artillery capacity to parity with German levels, and they set about building an extensive rail network in western Russia to facilitate military operations against Austria-Hungary and/or Germany.

Moltke realised that Germany could not win the new arms race which he had set in motion. By 1917 Germany would no longer be in a position to defeat the Triple Entente in war. Furthermore, the position of Austria-Hungary was growing weak-



*Bethmann-Hollweg, German Chancellor.*

er all the time. Hence, Moltke calculated that Germany must engage the Triple Entente in battle before 1917. Indeed, his attitude is best summed up in the phrase he used: 'the sooner the better'.

### 'July crisis'

On 28 June 1914 Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, was assassinated in Sarajevo by a Bosnian Serb. Even though Bosnia was then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Austrian government held Serbia responsible for the murder. The Austrians were determined to go to war to crush Serbia and so to eliminate the greatest threat to the survival of their empire. The killing of the archduke gave them the perfect excuse to do this. Ever since the first Balkan War (1912) the Austrians had wanted to invade Serbia, but the Germans repeatedly discouraged them from doing so. However, by the summer of 1914 the German government was ready for war (*Kriegsueillig*).

On 5 July 1914 Kaiser Wilhelm II gave the Austro-Hungarians the infamous 'blank cheque', promising Germany's unconditional support. In doing this the kaiser and the German government knew that once Austria-Hungary attacked Serbia the Russians would certainly intervene, and that war would engulf virtually all of Europe. During the month of July Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg sometimes entertained vague hopes that Russia might not intervene, and that the war might be confined to the Balkans. Even the kaiser had qualms at the prospect of a European war.

Nonetheless, the German government did not rescind the 'blank cheque' given to Austria-Hungary. British and Russian attempts to preserve the peace were repeatedly rejected. In the final analysis, the kaiser and the German ruling class preferred to take the risk of war in the hope of winning great conquests, rather

than face the steady erosion of their powers and privileges within a Germany at peace. The German government waited only for a plausible excuse for war. The German people had to be convinced that their country was the victim of war, not its instigator. Otherwise they might not be prepared to fight.

When the tsar mobilised his army to defend Russia and Serbia his ally, the German government portrayed his action as an act of aggression. On 1 August 1914 Germany declared war on Russia. Two days later, on the pretext of a French invasion of Germany, the kaiser set the Schlieffen Plan in motion. German troops passed through Belgium in order to invade France. This brought Britain into the war.

### Summary

Historians now agree that Germany's rulers deliberately provoked the outbreak of the First World War. Fischer's thesis, as elaborated by Berghahn and others, is generally accepted as the most plausible explanation for that action.

German foreign policy, at least from 1898, was designed to neutralise the pressures for constitutional reform inside Germany, by distracting the public with ambitions for world power. However, *Weltpolitik* had terrible consequences. It raised international tensions and frightened Germany's neighbours so much that they 'encircled' the country for their own safety. The failure to achieve the long-promised world power, and the enormous costs of the arms race(s) it provoked, widened the divisions inside Germany, between the elites who governed Germany and the members of the popularly-elected Reichstag who demanded reform.

Since the elites were determined not to make concessions to the Reichstag, war seemed to them to be the only means available to preserve their powers and privileges. Ironically, the German elites succeeded in duping the workers and the middle class into believing that the First World War was waged to defend the German people.

### Further reading

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