Margaret MacMillan in the library of St Antony's College, University of Oxford. "One of the key factors leading towards the First World War was the German decision to build a deep-sea navy," she argues

Photograph by Jeni Nott

INTERVIEW / MARGARET MACMILLAN

"The First World War had so many possible causes that people have come to think of it as inevitable"

*Margaret MacMillan's new book explores the tensions that led to the outbreak of the First World War. She talks to **Matt Elton** about the world of 1914 and whether conflict could have been averted*

MARGARET MACMILLAN
Born in Ontario, Canada, MacMillan studied history at the University of Toronto before completing a doctorate of philosophy at St Antony's College, University of Oxford, where she is currently an honorary fellow and warden. She will be presenting a Radio 4 series on the First World War during the summer of 2014

In the context of the alliances that shaped the path to the First World War, what do you think led Britain to alter its stance on Europe?

The British had a policy for most of the 19th century – and in earlier centuries as well – not of isolation, but of remaining aloof from Europe. Their main interest was their empire, which was the world's biggest, and their trade – they were the world's largest trading nation until 1914, although that was being challenged. What the British really wanted was peace and quiet on the continent, and a balance of power: they didn't want any single power dominating the continent, because that could make it difficult to access markets and could be a threat to British interests. And so, from the British point of view, as long as things on the continent remained fairly stable and in equilibrium, they felt they didn't need to intervene.

But towards the end of the 19th century, the British were concerned that they were becoming too isolated. They were beginning to realise just how few friends they had, I think, and began to rethink how they would engage with the rest of the world.

How did Germany's decisions affect the rest of Europe?

I think, and I'm sure many would disagree, that one of the key factors leading towards the war was the German decision to build a deep-sea navy. Germany was the predominant land power in Europe; it commanded the centre of Europe and, increasingly, its trade. As one German industrialist said just before the First World War, "it's crazy to spend money on the military; give us a couple of generations and we'll peacefully dominate Europe economically" – as has happened since 1945. But Kaiser Wilhelm II and his minister of the navy, Admiral von Tirpitz, decided that Germany needed a deep-sea fleet. It was partly the thinking of the time, that you couldn't be a great power without overseas trade and overseas colonies. And to do that, you needed a big navy.

Von Tirpitz argued that Germany should build a navy just big enough that the British would hesitate to take them on, because it would leave them too weakened against all the other powers. It was what he called the "risk theory". If they could make the British sit up and take notice, they would have to become friends. The calculation, of course,

didn't take into account the fact that the British might not decide to do this, and when the Germans started to build big battleships, the British thought, "Well, okay, we're going to take you on". So the Germans found themselves engaged in a very expensive naval race. It also drove Britain away.

Do you think the idea that nations had to expand to be successful meant that war was inevitable?

I never like to say that war is inevitable, but I think that imperialism and imperial rivalries did add to the tensions among nations. There was a real scramble for colonies, and although, if you look at the balance sheet, most colonies didn't pay for themselves, that was not how people thought.

Africa had been pretty well divided up by 1900 – very few bits of it remained independent. Most of Asia had been carved up, too, and China was left as a real temptation because it was ruled by a declining dynasty and had huge internal problems. Powers were already moving in and building railways, which in those days were a way of spreading influence and of moving troops around. So you could see what the divisions would look like: the British going up the Yangtzee valley, the French coming up from the south, the Russians down from the north, and the Germans coming in from the sea. What I think helped save China was a sense among the powers that they would risk war if they really started moving in. That was not something that they necessarily wanted to do.

Do you think that the killing of Franz Ferdinand was the most important event in the lead-up to war?

I would say that the killing of the archduke in Sarajevo was the precipitating event, but that any other number of such events could have precipitated the war. I think Europe had got to the point by 1914 where, unfortunately enough, people in positions to make decisions about war thought, "We can do it, we can get

away with it, we can solve something here. And it might even be a good time to do it."

There had been a series of crises that were getting closer and closer together. There was a crisis in Morocco in 1905-6, a crisis in Bosnia in 1908, another in 1911, the Balkans wars in 1912 and 1913. The tension built up and so, when the archduke was assassinated, it became a precipitating factor. But I think that other things could have done it as well.
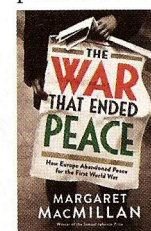
Can we pin the blame for war on any specific individuals?

The whole question of blame is tricky. But I would say that there were those who actively risked war, like Conrad von Hötzendorf, the Austrian chief of the general staff, who was always advocating war. I will hold him to blame for that. There was also von Tirpitz, who really helped to initiate the Anglo-German naval race. I would also blame those who were fatalist and said: "What can we do?" And then there were those who were simply too weak to say no. In the end, the pressures built up, but there were still those who could have stopped it, who could have refused to sign the mobilisation orders. That includes the tsar of Russia and Wilhelm II of Germany. I think that it's a failure of leadership in the face of at least a few key people who were pushing more actively for war.

Do you think that war could still have been avoided, even fairly late on?

Yes. The problem with the First World War is that there's so many possible causes that people tend to think that it had to be inevitable. But you can say exactly the same thing about the Cold War – and it didn't happen. At various stages, when it got to the edge, people pulled back. That was partly because of nuclear weapons, but nevertheless I do think that just because you have lots of reasons for war doesn't mean that you have to have it. Someone has to, in the end, say: "Okay, unleash the dogs of war." I don't think that it was inevitable, although I think the point at which it probably became impossible to avoid was once Russia had mobilised its forces. **H**

> "Pressures built up, but there were still people who could have stopped war"

JENI NOTT