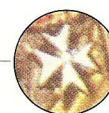


THE UNPREDICTABLE PAST

# GERMANY, BRITAIN & THE COMING OF WAR IN 1914



Indeed Britain's relations with both Russia and France had been tense for most of the nineteenth century, and had only recently - and haltingly - improved. Particularly by the British left, Russia was seen as a police state; nor had Bloody Nicholas' suppression of the 1905 revolution been forgiven. As for France, unlike Protestant, hygienic Germany, she had a bad reputation for decadence and corruption, typified by the Dreyfus affaire. Such hostility was cordially reciprocated by both powers. Russia continuously

Richard Wilkinson explains what went wrong in

## Anglo-German relations before the First World War.

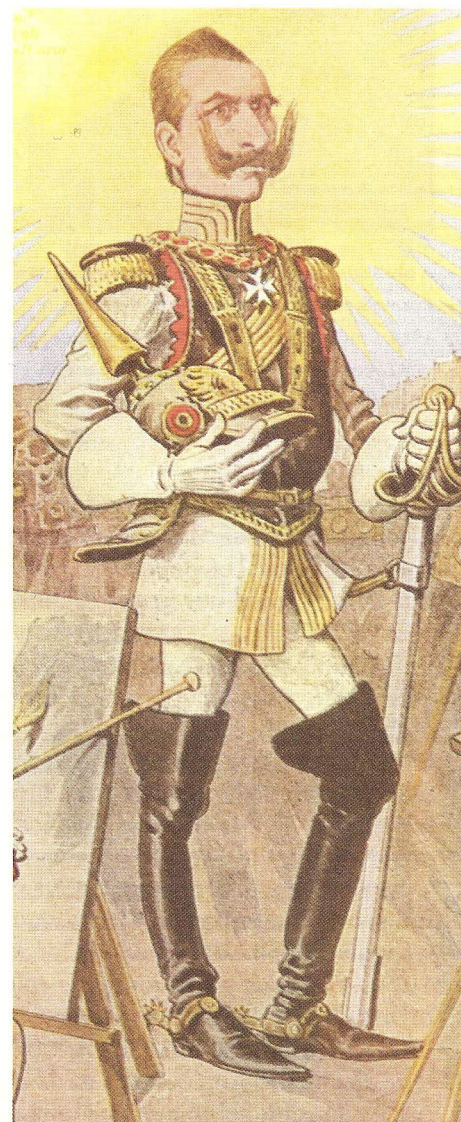
Just suppose that, every time a war broke out, all the diplomats and soldiers involved were hanged. Even more fancifully, suppose that diplomats, generals and heads of governments were gifted with second sight. If either of these scenarios had applied in August 1914, there would have been no World War One. The German, Austrian, Russian and Turkish empires would have survived at any rate in the short term, while in the longer term the British and French empires would have escaped the wounds inflicted by that terrible conflict. Millions of young men would have lived, millions of folk at home would have been spared bereavement. As for the economic damage caused by the War, who knows what benefits to mankind might otherwise have accrued?

'If only' must especially apply to Britain's role. Of all the great powers, her involvement seems the most unnecessary. After all, she had kept out of the Franco-Prussian War in 1870. Why not in 1914? This is a good question, as Britain's relations with Germany were mainly cordial. Indeed Joseph Chamberlain had pursued the possibility of an alliance between 1899 and 1901. By the summer of 1914 contentious issues such as the Berlin-Baghdad railway and the Portuguese colonies had been resolved. The royal families were closely connected. When Cecil

Rhodes founded his scholarships at Oxford, he decreed that candidates should come from the British Empire, the United States - and Germany. Trade flourished - and while British manufacturers were encountering increasing German competition, no sensible businessman ever wants war.

### Wrong Enemy, Wrong Allies?

'How German and how right!' sums up the widespread admiration in Britain for everything German. R.B. Haldane, the War Minister, was not alone in recognising Germany as 'his spiritual home', for many shared his enthusiasm for German culture and philosophy. German secondary and tertiary education was correctly perceived to be decades ahead of Britain, especially in the realm of science and technology. At German universities the seminar prevailed over the absurd one-to-one tutorial in vogue at Oxbridge. Left-wingers admired the German Social Democratic Party as the wealthiest and most influential socialist party in the world. C.P. Scott, the Editor of the *Manchester Guardian*, spoke for enlightened Britain in opposing the very idea of war against 'our German cousins'. While he attacking the general 'neurosis' with regard to the balance of power, he insisted that if Britain did have a natural enemy, it was Russia. The vast majority of the Liberal Party cordially agreed.



A French caricature of Kaiser Wilhelm II. Was he one of the Guilty Men? Should the First World War be called 'the Kaiser's war'?



The Kaiser corresponded with Tsar Nicholas in fluent English and read P.G.

Wodehouse aloud to his entourage, glaring at them when they failed to laugh.



**A photograph of Sir Edward Grey (1862-1933), Britain's controversial Foreign Secretary in 1914. Could he have done more to prevent the war? Was he led astray by his anti-German officials?**

threatened India's north-west frontier, and never forgave Britain's encouragement of Japan in 1904. The French could not forget Britain's seizure of Egypt in 1882 and humiliation of France at Fashoda in 1898. When the colonel of a Breton regiment was congratulated by a British staff officer for its gallant assault on the German lines in 1915, he replied, 'I've told them that they are attacking the English!'

So why the quarrel between Britain and Germany? What went wrong? Who were the Guilty Men in 1914? This article considers the role of the Kaiser, pilloried at the end of the war as a war-criminal. It looks critically at the Anglo-German naval rivalry, considered by most historians to be the prime cause of hostility between the 'two white races' (to quote the toast proposed by the Kaiser at the Kiel naval review in 1909). First, however, Britain's

responsibility must be assessed as against Germany's. After all, Britain declared war on Germany, and not the other way round.

### **British War Guilt?**

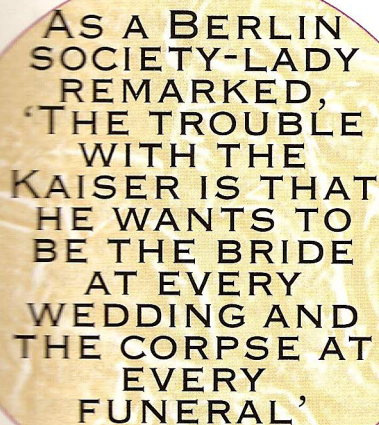

Anti-German forces certainly existed in British government and society. The most strident were Foreign Office mandarins such as Nicolson, Hardinge and Eyre Crowe who allegedly 'captured' the Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey. Soldiers such as the francophile Henry Wilson and admirals such as the pugnacious Jacky Fisher almost welcomed war with Germany. The Kaiser's latest biographer, Giles MacDonagh, criticises the British establishment for its unsympathetic, supercilious attitude towards his hero. In the crisis of July-August 1914 Bonar Law and Lansdowne on behalf of the Conservative Party urged Asquith to declare war on Germany. Why? Perhaps they wished to demonstrate to the world Britain's great power status, having failed to do so during the humiliations of the Boer War. Perhaps they appreciated the inevitable problems which a Liberal government would experience in the

management of a major war - to the certain benefit of the Conservatives. Perhaps here too there was visceral hatred of Germany.

More puzzling is the Liberal cabinet's decision to go to war - with only John Burns and John Morley in opposition. Here the finger of accusation points at Grey, the Foreign Secretary. He is blamed for his rigid adherence to the ententes with France and Russia, and for misleading both cabinet and Commons with regard to Britain's commitments. If he was not exactly germanophobe, he certainly listened to his professional advisers. Would he have deterred Germany if he had converted the entente into an alliance? Churchill observed: 'We have all the disadvantages of an alliance without its advantages'. John Charmley has criticised Grey for writing out blank cheques which he wrongly hoped would never be cashed. All one can say here is that these criticisms were not expressed at the time; nor does Grey, the gentle fisherman and bird-watcher, really convince as a war-monger. He was in an awkward position, desperately wanting to reassure his French friends but unable to take steps which would be disowned by his cabinet colleagues. And the Germans were consistently bellicose and aggressive, touchy and suspicious. As we shall see, they made the running in the final crisis of July-August 1914.

Perhaps indeed the plain truth is that Britain was more sinned against than sinning. Granted that Article 231 of the Versailles Treaty, which put the responsibility for the War on Germany and her allies, may have been 'victors' justice'. But the case against Germany has been put most cogently by a German. In 1962 Fritz Fischer rocked West Germany's academic establishment with his *Germany's Aims in the First World War*. According to Fischer there was little to choose between the foreign policies of the Second and the Third





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Reichs. The cynical and ruthless leaders of the Kaiser's political, military and business establishments anticipated Hitler's imperialist aggression. Bethmann-Hollweg's description of Britain's treaty obligations to Belgium as 'a scrap of paper' would have come appropriately from von Ribbentrop, while the exploitation of defeated Russia at Brest-Litovsk in March 1918 amounted to the acquisition of lebensraum on a scale of which the Führer would have approved. Fischer's arguments have been widely attacked. Yet *mitteleuropa* (a huge area of exploitation in the centre of Europe) still looks a convincing explanation of German aggression leading up to war - and of her treatment of defeated Russia.

### The Kaiser

Even if Fischer's thesis is fully accepted, it is hard to see how Britain was affected, at any rate in 1914. British admiration for Germany was reciprocated. German friendliness towards Britain was widespread. It was expressed formally by her ambassadors to the Court of St. James, first Metternich, then briefly Marshall and finally the urbane and reasonable Lichnowsky. When the British sailed away from the Kiel naval review in July 1914, a German warship signalled, 'Friends

in the past, friends for ever'. The Kaiser personified German admiration for the British way of life. 'I adore England', he told Theodore Roosevelt. When he arrived in Holland as an exile, his first request was for 'a cup of real good English tea'. He corresponded with Tsar Nicholas in fluent English and read P.G. Wodehouse aloud to his entourage, glaring at them when they failed to laugh. He even appreciated critical cartoons of himself in *Punch* - 'a good likeness, do you not agree?' When he asked a British businessman what the man-in-the-street thought of him, he was fobbed off with a story about two 'Tommies' watching a parade in Berlin; one explained to the other that senior generals had two clean shirts a day, whereas the Kaiser's day consisted of 'shirt on, shirt off, shirt on, shirt off the whole time'. Wilhelm laughed uproariously.

Unfortunately the Kaiser was inconsistent. It has been remarked that 'he approached every question with an open mouth'. His notorious telegram in which he congratulated the Boer premier Paul Kruger on his defeat of the Jameson raid in 1895 caused deep offence in Britain. His frosty relationship with his uncle Edward VII was well-known. Nor was his description of British cabinet ministers as 'unmitigated noodles' appreciated. Yet the Kaiser meant well. He acquired genuine and widespread popularity in Britain when Queen Victoria died in his arms.

How much impact had Wilhelm on the outcome of events? Modern historians question the Kaiser's direct influence on policy. We are told that at the most he interfered, gratifying his own desire to show off. As a Berlin society-lady remarked, 'The trouble with the Kaiser is that he wants to be the bride at every wedding and the corpse at every funeral'. But the most indisputable area where the Kaiser did indeed affect policy and also damaged

Anglo-German relations was in the creation of the German navy. This is an instructive story in which admiration of all things British combined with the Kaiser's typically German touchiness and nationalistic aggression.

Two points, however, need stressing. First, there was never any German ambition to take on the Royal Navy. Admiral Tirpitz, who master-minded the whole project, was like his master an admirer of Britain. He too spoke fluent English, he enjoyed English literature and he sent his daughter to Cheltenham Ladies' College. His intention was to prevent Britain entering a future war against Germany by confronting her with the prospect of a naval war in which she would encounter unacceptable losses. But the point was that it would not happen. The deterrent would deter. Of course it did not turn out like that. Bismarck and the elder Moltke were right. Both had been adamant that British friendship followed from Germany's disinterest in seapower. Unfortunately Tirpitz could not match Bismarck's perspicacity. Like the Kaiser, he was a snob, rather than a statesman. Germany needed a fleet 'to be well-born'. It was just for show.

Secondly, the Kaiser, who loved big ships and personally designed a battleship which would do everything except float, adopted the irrational, emotional approach of the rabid enthusiast. He was a military sentimentalist. So when it came to actually using the fleet, he had a purely sentimental scenario in view, as his Chancellor Bülow observed:

'What William II most desired was to see himself at the head of a glorious German fleet, starting out on a peaceful visit to England. The English sovereign with his fleet would meet the German Kaiser in Portsmouth. The two fleets would file past each other, the



## The long-dead Schlieffen called the shots both in Berlin and in London.

two monarchs each wearing the naval uniform of the other's country would then stand on the bridge of their flagships. Then after they had embraced in the prescribed manner, a gala dinner with lovely speeches would be held in Cowes.'

'Not much harm in that', one might retort - though it was certainly an expensive way of gratifying the Kaiser's hobby.

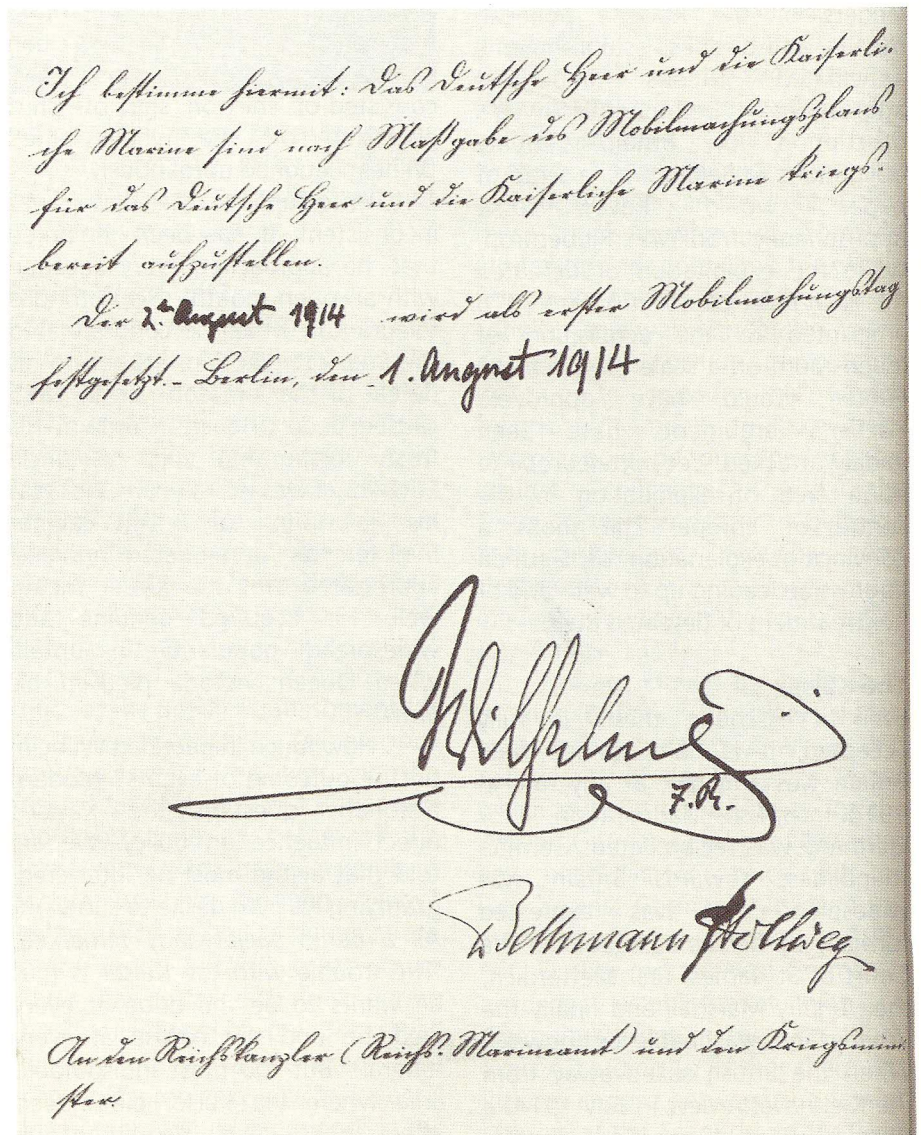
Unfortunately it did do harm. For in practice things were not always so amiable. The British could be forgiven for suspecting more sinister objectives when in June 1911 the Germans sent the gunboat *Panther* to Agadir on the Atlantic coast of Morocco - a handy coaling station for forays into the Atlantic. Nor did the Germans take kindly to Winston Churchill's description of the German navy as 'a luxury', in contrast to Britain's navy on which her lifeblood depended. Nevertheless the same Winston Churchill, never the most pacific of characters, was apparently sincere when he commented on the naval rivalry with Germany: 'I deeply deplore the situation, for I have never had any but friendly feelings toward that great nation and her illustrious sovereign & I regard the antagonism which has developed as insensate. Anything in my power to terminate it I would gladly do'. And in fact the antagonism caused by the naval rivalry had subsided by the summer of 1914. Britain had demonstrated her determination to maintain her lead in battleships which Germany had come to respect.

**Germany's mobilisation order of 1 August 1914, signed by Wilhelm II and his Chancellor, Bethmann Hollweg. Admiral von Müller noted in his diary: 'The mood is brilliant. We have managed magnificently to make us appear the attacked party.'**

The tragic and, for Britain, highly disconcerting war at sea which eventually materialised may well have invested the pre-war naval race with greater significance than it possessed at the time. The Germans soon showed their teeth. Early in the War German battle-cruisers raided east coast towns. The bombardment of Scarborough at 8 a.m. on 16 December 1914 was especially shocking. The town was full of wealthy holiday-makers and boarding-school children departing for Christmas. Mass panic ensued. Men in pyjamas stampeded onto trains leaving the town, and crowds streamed down the road to York

shouting 'the Germans are coming!' After 29 people of all ages and sexes had been killed, the commander of the battle-cruisers, Admiral Hipper, was christened 'the Baby-killer' while 'Remember Scarborough!' featured on recruitment posters.

The naval war emphatically demonstrated German technological superiority. When the German fleet was eventually cornered at Jutland on 31 May 1916, British losses exceeded German to such an extent that sailors coming ashore at Rosyth after the battle were booed by angry crowds. Even more humiliating was the effectiveness of Germany's U-boats. In January 1914 Admiral





Jackie Fisher accurately predicted the nature of submarine warfare: 'There is nothing else the submarine can do except sink her capture and therefore, however inhuman and barbarous it may appear, the submarine menace is a truly terrible one for British commerce'. Asquith was so shocked that he refused to circulate Fisher's paper, while Churchill minuted 'I do not believe that this would ever be done by a civilized power'. The sinking of the *Lusitania* in May 1915 when 1,201 people drowned and the unrestricted U-boat warfare introduced in January 1917 which brought Britain to her knees proved Fisher right, Asquith and Churchill wrong.

### July Crisis

While these horrors were in the future - only a very few visionaries guessed what war would be like either on land or sea - Germany's

actions in July and August 1914 brought Britain into the war. Whether Fischer's arguments are accepted or not, Germany's support for Austria-Hungary in delivering the unacceptable ultimatum to Serbia, her declaration of war on Russia and France and, above all, her implementation of the Schlieffen Plan cannot be denied. Even if Fischer's indictment is rejected, criminal stupidity must be laid at Germany's door. For the Schlieffen Plan was the wrong plan. The Kaiser realised that attacking France through Belgium did not answer the actual crisis which emerged after the assassination of Franz Ferdinand. Germany had no quarrel with France. The right answer therefore was to avoid any provocation in the west and deliver an all-out attack on Serbia's ally, Russia. But no such alternative plan existed.

Might-have-beens are not

normally the historian's province. But it is impossible not to speculate with regard to Britain's involvement in the First World War. All the evidence suggests that France's pacific left-wing government would have remained neutral if Germany had attacked Russia, and not France. In which case there was no way that Britain would have intervened. Indeed Britain would probably have stayed out if Belgium's neutrality had been respected even if France had been attacked. Grey would then have resigned. The Tories would have made Asquith's position very difficult. But Britain would have stayed on the touchline - at any rate for the time being. In the event Germany's rigid adherence to the wrong plan solved the Liberal government's problems. The invasion of Belgium contravened the treaty of London (1839). Intervention on Belgium's behalf enabled the Liberal government to occupy the moral high ground. Significantly the 'horrible hun' stories subsequently invented by British propaganda portrayed the raping of Belgian women and the hanging of Belgian monks. It was left to the Labour leader Ramsay MacDonald to protest that the threat to Belgium did not justify the disruption of European peace.

Thus it was that Germany demolished centuries of friendship between 'the two white races'. George V's famous defence to the U.S. ambassador - 'My God, Mr. Page, what else could we have done?' - oversimplifies a complex situation. Yet Britain's response was at least understandable, however fraught with disastrous consequences. Germany was primarily responsible for the breakdown of the concert of Europe. For a whole century this concert had kept the peace. Apart from the Crimean War explosive issues had been solved by diplomacy ever since Waterloo. The last occasion on which this concert worked was at the end

## TIMELINE

- 1894 Dual Alliance between Russia and France
- 1898 Tirpitz's first Navy Law
- 1901 Joseph Chamberlain pursues alliance with Germany
- 1904 Anglo-French Entente
- 1907 Anglo-Russian Entente
- 1911 Agadir crisis
- 1912-3 Balkan wars settled by London conference
- 1914 (28 June) Assassination of Franz Ferdinand at Sarajevo
  - (23 July) Austria-Hungary's ultimatum to Serbia
  - (1 August) Germany declares war on Russia
  - (3 August) Germany declares war on France and invades Belgium
  - (4 August) Britain declares war on Germany





Images of militant nationalism are superimposed on this Jubilee portrait of the Kaiser.

of the first Balkan War in December 1912 when Edward Grey presided over a peace conference in London. His efforts to convene another such conference in July 1914 failed. Why? Some historians have adopted determinist explanations - economic rivalry, the violence of nationalism, the impact of technological change and so forth. But the fact was that Germany opted for war. Her armies were poised, the Kiel Canal had just been widened. The railway timetables were perfected down to the last wagon - and so the troop-trains headed for Belgium. Next stop, Armageddon.

### The Responsibility

Yet the pity of it! No German welcomed war with Britain. 'The dead Edward is stronger than the living I', fatuously bleated the Kaiser,

attributing Germany's 'encirclement' to his machiavellian uncle. Why could men not behave sensibly, for instance by accepting Grey's conference invitation? V. R. Berghahn has applied the term 'autism' to the perpetual inability of the two armed camps to think rationally about the intentions of the other side - a term originally used in the context of the Cold War. Just occasionally common sense broke through. When Edward Grey told Count Metternich that the terms of the Franco-Russian alliance did not provide for revanche, the German ambassador smiled grimly: 'Yes, we

know very well that it does not'. Yet sadly such honest admission of the truth was unusual.

MacDonagh blames the Kaiser for the failure of German diplomacy in which he longed to play a prominent part. For in the final crisis the politicians and the diplomats - who opposed war - were swept aside by the generals who believed that 'war now' was in Germany's interests. Here the comparison with the Cold War is especially instructive - for its contrasts rather than its parallels. For in the 1950s and 1960s the nuclear deterrent really deterred. *Dr. Strangelove* remained fictional, the Cuba missiles crisis - certainly nail-biting but resolved peacefully - was factual. In 1914 the arms race in conventional weapons led to the launching of a European war by the leaders of the German general staff because they were not deterred by their enemies' arsenal. On the contrary, they believed that Germany's interests were best served by war as soon as possible.

Meanwhile the politicians from the Kaiser downwards failed to control the generals. Again the Cold War springs to mind. President Truman's dismissal of General MacArthur when he advocated 'nuking' Communist China contrasts with Bethmann-Hollweg's weak acquiescence in the Schlieffen Plan. Grey's devious misleading of cabinet and parliament has been called 'the failure of the democratic process'. So it may have been, but in the Kaiser's reich there was no democratic process at all. 'The officer strode the land like a god, the reserve-officer like a demi-god'. When Berchtold, Austria-Hungary's cynical foreign minister, was restrained by Germany's politicians but urged by her generals, he minuted: 'What a laugh - who rules in Berlin?' The appalling answer was that the long-dead Schlieffen called the shots both in Berlin and in London.

### Further Reading

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