

## CHAPTER ONE

# The War Imagined: 1890–1914

GERD KRUMEICH  
(translated by Mark Jones)

The years between 1900 and the outbreak of World War I are generally described as the “prewar” period. However, there is no consensus about what the term “prewar” really means or about the period it covers. Some scholars have begun with the Franco-Prussian war of 1870–1, but it is more common to see the years of the “scramble for Africa” and the “imperialist delirium” as the true prewar period.<sup>1</sup> Even here, the precise starting point depends on national perspectives. For Germany, it might be taken as Kaiser Wilhelm’s policy of expansion on to the world stage (*Weltpolitik*) in the later 1890s, or the subsequent naval rivalry with Britain. For the French, the military alliance with Russia in 1893, or the First and Second Moroccan Crises of 1905 and 1911, make equally credible starting points. For Russia it is perhaps the recovery from the catastrophe of the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–5 and the 1905 revolution.

I propose to divide the prewar period into a longer phase when enmities were created and a more immediate phase of acute tensions leading to the outbreak of hostilities. The first phase was defined by the gradual increase in international antagonism and the polarization of the European alliance system into two antagonistic blocks. The second phase was marked by an increasingly nervous disposition toward what was seen as the inevitability – and for some the desirability – of a war that would reshape the course of world development. Viewed as a whole, the pattern of events and decisions leading up to July 1914 make World War I seem a logical, and even inevitable, outcome.

Yet what made it so requires an understanding of how contemporaries perceived events and came to decisions. For the murder at Sarajevo, on 28 June 1914, of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir apparent to the throne of Austria-Hungary, was an event of relatively minor importance by comparison with its consequences. Various heads of state had been assassinated in the previous 30 years. This outrage only unleashed war because of accumulated preconditions, not the least important of which were the mental dispositions or attitudes of contemporary decision-makers – the “unspoken assumptions,” and also the thoroughly pronounced presumptions, that had accumulated in the critical years from around 1900.<sup>2</sup>



**Map 1** Europe at the outbreak of World War I

## National Enmities

Notable among these attitudes were deep animosities on the part of the political and military elites of Europe, their readiness to reckon in terms of absolute enmity and their reluctance to set a higher price on resolving conflict than on going to war. This readiness to create and indulge enmities encompassed both hard decisions and the mentalities that helped shape these. Although the phenomenon still requires more investigation, it is worth noting that the great early nineteenth-century Prussian theorist of war, Carl von Clausewitz, wrote in his classic analysis (in which he sought to distil the lessons of the Napoleonic conflicts) that “Even the most civilized of peoples ... can be fired with passionate hatred for each other.”<sup>3</sup>

In the introduction to his highly perceptive analysis of the origins and decline of the ideological illusion of communism, François Furet acknowledged that World War I was a decisive turning point in contemporary history. Paradoxically, he insisted that there was no clear causal explanation for the outbreak of the war and that it had not really been necessary. In the end, war had become unavoidable simply because all the key decision-makers had accepted it. But Furet went on to accuse the statesmen of the period of tremendous folly and thoughtlessness when their actions are measured by the enormity of the catastrophe that followed.<sup>4</sup>

In reality the accusation is highly anachronistic, since it presumes a foreknowledge of the consequences of decisions that contemporaries could not possibly have had. To the extent that such a misapprehension results from the involvement of scholars in the events they describe, it is easily forgiven. But today, almost a hundred years after the summer of 1914, we should avoid such anachronism and seek to establish what contemporaries meant by war and how they understood the cumulative events that we know, as they could not, were to produce a devastating European conflict.

## Military Misperceptions of Future War

One of the most important elements of the puzzle is why military commanders, those whose function it was to anticipate the next war, so signally failed to predict the reality of warfare in 1914–18. That failure does not mean that no one saw that a future war might be a catastrophe for the societies that waged it. There was a certain vein of pessimistic thinking in this regard even where one might least expect it. Count Helmuth von Moltke the Elder was the victorious German Commander-in-Chief in the Franco-Prussian War and subsequently Chief of the German General Staff, and in one of the best-known examples of such pessimism, he warned the Reichstag in 1899 that:

If war ... breaks out, its length and end are unforeseeable. The greatest European powers, armed like never before, will go to war against each other. None of these powers can be so completely subjected in one or two campaigns, that they declare themselves defeated ...; it could be a seven year war, it could be a thirty years war – and woe betide him who sets Europe on fire, who first throws the fuse in the powder keg!<sup>5</sup>

Even earlier, in the mid-1880s, Friedrich Engels warned of the mass sacrifice entailed by the warfare of the future, a view repeated in the often-quoted speech of the elder statesman of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD), August Bebel, in 1911:

Both sides are producing arms and will continue to do so ... until the point, at which one or the other one day says: better a horrible end than a horror without end .... Then the

catastrophe will happen. Then in Europe the great mobilization plans will be unleashed, by which sixteen to eighteen million men, the male blood of the different nations, armed with the best instruments of murder, will go to the battlefield against each other .... The damnation of the bourgeois world is approaching.<sup>6</sup>

Yet although these eschatological warnings predicted a long war with enormous casualties, they had nothing to say about the nature of military technology and the form the destruction would take.

The focus upon massive numbers of casualties should come as no surprise. Since the 1880s, new recruiting laws in both France and Germany had made it possible at least in theory to mobilize for the first time the entire male population capable of military service for a future war. The creation of a new kind of army numbering millions of soldiers logically produced a new scale of potential casualties. But few, if any, intellectually mastered the real consequences of such massive armies. Even Engels went in for traditional war games (socialists affectionately nicknamed him “the General”), while Bebel let slip that he would like to fight in a war against the “bloody Tsar.”<sup>7</sup> Indeed, despite his description of the destructive power of future wars, Moltke the Elder, along with his successor, Count Alfred von Schlieffen, continued to plan for the next campaign in an entirely conventional manner.

The observations of Colmar von der Goltz, Germany’s most popular military writer before the war, are a good example of the persistence of traditional military thinking. In *The Nation in Arms* (1883), which became a kind of Bible for officers and the educated public, Goltz investigated the problem caused by mass conscript armies.<sup>8</sup> He was convinced that no single decisive battle would decide the course of a war. Rather, future wars would consist of numerous battles and might last a long time. Goltz was also one of the first to draw attention to the logistical difficulties of supplying both weapons and food to such massive armies but he was convinced that a well-managed military, such as that of Germany, could overcome such problems and systematically exhaust its enemy during a long war.

The views of the Chief of the German General Staff from 1891 to 1905, Count Alfred von Schlieffen, however, were premised on a short war, and revealed even more clearly than Goltz’s writings the ambivalent and limited understanding of the real nature of a future war. Schlieffen’s famous war plan (known by his name even after subsequent modifications) was completed in 1904–5. It dealt with the diplomatic situation faced by Germany since the Franco-Russian military agreement of 1893, which exposed Germany to the risk of a war on two fronts. Schlieffen dealt with this by planning to concentrate German forces initially against France, which would mobilize more rapidly than Russia. After a swift invasion, resulting in the encirclement and annihilation of the French armies, the Germans would turn with their Austro-Hungarian ally to eliminate Russia, which it was assumed would mobilize much more slowly. The thinking behind the plan showed a very limited understanding of the dynamics of a war between entire peoples fought with industrialized weaponry. For to reach Paris in six weeks and crush the French assumed that the Belgians would offer no resistance and that the French would behave in the same paralyzed and panic-stricken manner as the armies of Napoleon III had done in the summer and autumn of 1870. How the German armies were meant to handle real resistance when they would be marching over 20 km a day and requiring vast amounts of fodder and munitions from dwindling supply-lines was simply not addressed.

Such intellectual arrogance arose from the belief that Republican France and its army were morally inferior to Germany. It was this that enabled German military and political leaders to discount the “friction” of unforeseeable events that Clausewitz had warned would slow down any military operation.<sup>9</sup> Schlieffen’s writings after his retirement betrayed the same fundamental illusions as his Plan. In “War Today,” an essay published in the popular *Deutsche Revue* in 1909, he argued that high levels of armaments and general conscription would not make wars longer, as suggested by Moltke the Elder, but would shorten them:

All the doubts about the horrible cost, the possible high casualties ... have emerged from the background. Universal conscription ... has dampened the lust for battle. The supposedly impregnable fortresses, behind which one feels warm and safe, appear to have reduced the incentive ... to bare one’s breasts to combat. The arms factories, the cannon foundries, the steam hammers that harden the steel used in fortresses have produced more friendly faces and more amiable obligingness than all the peace congresses could.<sup>10</sup>

Schlieffen’s argument became a commonplace of military thought in the years before the war.<sup>11</sup> As the German army’s service regulations of 1 January 1910 stated:

Today the character of war is defined by the longing for a quick and major decision. The call up of all those capable of military service, the strength of the armies, the difficulty of feeding the army, the cost of the state of war, the disruption of trade and transport, industry and agriculture, as well as the responsiveness of military organization and the ease with which the army can be assembled on a war footing – all mean that war would finish quickly.<sup>12</sup>

Military theory and war planning in France showed many similarities to those in Germany, but also some differences. Like the publications of Goltz, those of Colonel Ardant du Picq shaped opinion in France, although they dated from the 1860s.<sup>13</sup> An authentic hero who had died in the Franco-Prussian War, Ardant du Picq believed that large armies were not suited to long wars. He argued that strategy should focus upon obtaining victory through a small number of major battles determined by the fighting qualities of each nation’s soldiers. Over time Ardant du Picq’s observations gained such wide acceptance in the French General Staff that they became dogma. This was especially the case in reaction to the 1905 conscription law, which called up every Frenchman who was capable of military service. The resulting specter of the officer corps and military cadres being swamped by citizen soldiers alarmed many French generals, who did not believe that the sheer numbers of the “Nation in Arms” would translate into an effective military force.<sup>14</sup> They preferred to think in terms of an army led by professionals that would be able to show true leadership to its conscripts, instilling in them the fighting spirit that would bring victory. Ardant du Picq’s vision of a short but intensive war based on the soldiers’ morale matched this outlook perfectly.

Among those who developed this idea was the General Staff officer and artillery specialist, Ferdinand Foch, who in 1918 would become the commander of the Allied armies in France. Foch published two books, *Des principes de la guerre* (The Principles of War, 1903) and *De la conduite de la guerre* (The Conduct of War, 1904), which were reprinted several times before 1914. Foch believed that a future war would be such a massive affair that it must be brought to a conclusion quickly, and that the means to do this was a decisive battle in which the critical edge would be supplied by the fighting qualities and

high morale that had been developed in the soldiers. Only this psychological factor could make the Nation in Arms an effective fighting force.<sup>15</sup>

A range of publications disseminated these and similar opinions within the army and to the general public. Perhaps the most notable of these were two lectures delivered in 1911 by Colonel Grandmaison, head of the Bureau of Operations of the French General Staff. Grandmaison conceived of national security solely in terms of the offensive, which in turn he based on the idea that French troops possessed “superior morale” and a more aggressive spirit than their potential enemies. “Let us go to the extreme,” he concluded, talking again about the psychological factor, “and perhaps this will still not be enough.”<sup>16</sup>

Such views finally became dominant in the French army after the Second Moroccan Crisis when, under the new Commander-in-Chief, Joseph Joffre, the French formally adopted the doctrine of the short, offensive war. A new army regulation for the conduct of battle, the first since 1895, was promulgated on 28 October 1913. It stated:

The size of the military formations involved, the difficulty of re-supplying them, the disruption of the social and economic life of the country, all this requires as rapid an outcome as possible .... A decisive battle, exploited to the fullest extent, is the only way of bending the enemy to one's will by destroying his armies. This is the central act in war .... Only the offensive leads to positive results. By taking the operational initiative, one makes events happen rather than being at their mercy.<sup>17</sup>

The notorious Plan XVII, which governed the mobilization and deployment of the French armies in the event of war with Germany, shared the same logic. It envisaged an all-out offensive, showing no more understanding than the Schlieffen Plan of the form that a future war would take. Yet it would be unfair to assume that the officers who held such views were naïve in the face of the complex political, strategic and technological realities that they faced. While their projections might seem limited to us and doomed to failure, they were rooted in seemingly valid paradigms of military thought at the time. The military thinkers in question had ample opportunity to observe the technical transformations of weaponry, with enormously expanded firepower, and to observe the emerging conditions of combat on the ground, especially in the Russo-Japanese War and the Balkan Wars of 1912–13. The former war had a profound influence on the French generals, who were greatly impressed by the Japanese use of small assault groups whose attacks culminated in a bayonet charge, despite the devastating impact of field artillery and machine-guns. They believed that this kind of attack generated just the qualities of morale among the attackers that they were looking for and justified the heavy losses incurred. They concluded that despite modern weaponry, offensive war would be successful, especially if the “morale” of the troops was high.<sup>18</sup>

Military observers also drew lessons from the Balkan Wars, which saw the Balkan League of Bulgaria, Greece, Montenegro, and Serbia seize most of Macedonia and Thrace from a declining Ottoman Turkey in 1912–13, before the latter four powers deprived Bulgaria of its share of the spoils in a second war in 1913.<sup>19</sup> It was obvious from these conflicts that machine-guns and rapid-fire field guns would inflict massive losses and that as a result soldiers would have to dig trenches to take cover. Pictures of trenches piled high with corpses were even shown in illustrated magazines and newspapers, for example in the siege by the Bulgarians of Turkish-held Adrianople in the first Balkan War. However, such evidence of the mechanization of warfare did not result in a renunciation

or even modification of planning based upon the supremacy of the offensive. On the contrary, the events in the Balkans strengthened the belief that an absolute offensive was necessary precisely in order to avoid the human and material costs that would result from siege and stalemate. The factual observations were not wrong; but they were made to fit prevailing doctrines into which thinking and equipment had been invested, instead of modifying them. The resulting absurdity became clear in the Battle of the Frontiers in August 1914, when both the French and German armies suffered their highest losses of any month throughout the entire war before being forced to go to ground in the siege warfare of the trenches.

### Social Darwinism

Calculations of the future nature of combat were an important part of how war was imagined before 1914 because they determined assessments of the cost and likely outcome of going to war. But such evaluations were also part of a broader range of social theories and political values which determined the place assigned to war in moral and political thinking, not just in the military but among the political elites and in public opinion more widely.

Unlike in Britain or France, the discourse of unavoidable war in Germany was paralleled in leading military and conservative circles by a belief that war was also desirable and necessary. The view that war was a natural imperative that drove evolution and revitalized an otherwise decadent society reflected both the traditional values of Prussian militarism and an increasingly popular Social Darwinism. Although Social Darwinism was a wide-ranging influence in Europe and North America in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it acquired a particular application to the sphere of international relations and foreign and military policy in Germany.<sup>20</sup> General Friedrich von Bernhardi's widely read book, *Germany and the Next War*, offers a good example of how it could be used in support of a doctrine of aggressive military expansion. Published in 1912 at the height of the armaments race that followed the Second Moroccan Crisis, and quickly translated into the main European languages, it quickly obtained a cult following amongst those who supported German *Weltpolitik* and set alarm-bells ringing in Britain and France.

Bernhardi resolutely linked the anthropological necessity of war to Germany's "right to war" in view of its rapidly expanding population. This justified its right to use force to seize what had so far been denied to Germany by jealousy of the established major powers, especially Britain:

We are compelled to obtain space for our increasing population and markets for our growing industries. But at every step that we take in this direction England will resolutely oppose us. ... But if we were involved in a struggle with England, we can be quite sure that France would not neglect the opportunity of attacking our flank. ... Since the struggle is ... necessary and inevitable, we must fight it out, cost what it may. Indeed, we are carrying it on at the present moment, though not with drawn swords, and only by peaceful means so far.<sup>21</sup>

As a result, Bernhardi declared "that we cannot, under any circumstances, avoid fighting for our position in the world, and that the all-important point is, not to postpone that war as long as possible, but to bring it on under the most favorable conditions possible."<sup>22</sup>

More than almost any other German author, Bernhardi inspired British and French anti-German hate propaganda during World War I, confirming as he did the allied image

of the bloodthirsty Hun.<sup>23</sup> But if Bernhardi's book was widely read in Germany, it also aroused considerable controversy and was condemned by the liberal and left-wing press.<sup>24</sup> Even the government of Bethmann Hollweg went to considerable lengths to encourage criticism of it. For example, in his pamphlet *Deutsche Weltpolitik und kein Krieg* (German World Policy and No War), the diplomat Richard von Kühlmann called for German expansion without conflict with Britain, a course that Bethmann Hollweg attempted in 1912.<sup>25</sup> Yet in spite of this, Bernhardi's work achieved cult status. It was highly praised by groups such as the Pan-German League and the German Army League. The latter was an actively belligerent organization founded in 1912 following the Second Moroccan Crisis under the slogan of "national opposition," which immediately found a massive following in conservative and military circles, condemning what it saw as the slack policy of the government.<sup>26</sup>

### Germany and the Fear of Encirclement

There was thus no consensus on Social Darwinism amongst the German public before 1914. One slogan, however, rallied almost all shades of opinion and supplied a more direct political link with the idea of a likely, or inevitable, war. This was the specter of the hostile *encirclement* of Germany by the other major powers. This syndrome has remained peripheral to historical research on Germany before World War I. During the 1960s and 1970s, historians were content to show that German isolation simply resulted from its incoherent and aggressive policies. But the decisive factor, as far as the cultural history of political decision-making is concerned, is that most Germans before the war (and indeed long after it) believed that Germany was surrounded by malevolent neighbors and had to defend itself or face extinction. Only by taking into account this view can the willingness of the German leadership to go to war and the national solidarity achieved in August 1914 be explained.

Following the First Moroccan Crisis of 1905, the discourse of encirclement developed with breakneck speed. It appeared that the Kaiser's promised "place in the sun" could not be achieved using the diplomatic instruments of blackmail, threats, and bluff, since these had only stiffened the resistance of France, Russia, and Britain, lending further credence to the sense of encirclement. The Entente Cordiale of 1904, by which France and Britain had resolved their differences in the colonial sphere in order to present a common front to Germany, was viewed by Berlin as a catastrophe. This was compounded by the outcome of the Algeciras conference in 1906, following Germany's challenge in 1905 to French plans for predominance in nominally independent Morocco, at which Britain and Russia backed French claims.

Following Germany's setback at Algeciras, the German Chancellor Bülow expressed the encirclement phobia in a simple and martial fashion to the Reichstag:

Policies which began with the aim of encircling Germany, of forming a circle of powers around Germany, in order to isolate and paralyze it, would be regrettable for the peace of Europe. The formation of such a ring is impossible without exercising a certain kind of pressure. Pressure gives rise to counter-pressure.<sup>27</sup>

Evidence of just how widespread the encirclement stereotype had become after 1905–6 comes from the celebrated sociologist, Max Weber. Weber was without doubt critical of the Wilhelmine system, yet he was also a convinced "imperialist." He believed that if Germany did not expand it risked suffocation. In an essay on *Russia's Transition*



to *Pseudo-Constitutionalism*, published after the 1905 Revolution, he concluded: “We, for our part, in spite of the need to remain clear-headed in a world of enemies, should not forget that ... the future for “sated” nations is bleak.”<sup>28</sup>

Given that the encirclement syndrome was so widespread in Germany, it comes as no surprise that public opinion responded even more intensely to the Second Moroccan Crisis in 1911. It is now clear beyond doubt that German provocation deliberately triggered the crisis as a diplomatic maneuver.<sup>29</sup> However, the fact that once again Britain unambiguously supported France meant that it also seemed to supply definitive proof that the other major powers were encircling Germany, rendering war sooner or later inevitable.

Helmuth von Moltke the Younger, nephew of the victor of 1870–1 and Schlieffen’s successor as the chief of the General Staff, wrote in a major strategic reassessment of December 1911 that: “It has become clear, that the tension between Germany and France, which has existed for years and periodically intensified, has resulted in increased military activity in almost all the European States. All are preparing for a major war, which everyone expects sooner or later.”<sup>30</sup>

### Socialist Views on the Future War

Not everyone was as convinced as Moltke was about war, and there was no shortage of warnings about a looming catastrophe. The speech by Bebel that we have already quoted is perhaps the most relevant example. Indeed, much to the annoyance of the most revolutionary Marxists, the Second Socialist International placed a higher priority on opposing war than on promoting revolution during the decade before 1914. Nevertheless, socialist condemnation of “warmongering imperialism” coexisted with a readiness to defend the nation, especially if faced with enemy aggression.

This may come as a surprise. The resolutions of the Second International continually warned against international politics and the dangers of military folly. The perceptiveness of the International’s final resolution at the Basel conference, which was called in November 1912 in response to the First Balkan War, remains striking. After summoning the workers of all countries to oppose capitalist imperialism by international proletarian solidarity, it warned governments not to forget the lesson of the Commune and pointed out that the most likely consequence of war would be revolution. The underlying moral was that: “Proletarians regard it as a crime to shoot at each other for the profits of capitalists, to further the ambitions of dynasties, or for the sake of secret diplomatic treaties.”<sup>31</sup>

However, socialists avoided discussing what might happen if the socialists of one or more nations should be convinced of the defensive nature of a future war. Jean Jaurès was an exception in his 1911 book, *L’Armée nouvelle* (The New Army), which recognized that workers did have a *patrie*, which in some circumstances might come under unjustified attack. Jaurès advocated a purely defensive army based to a large extent on citizen reserves to meet such a contingency. But even Jaurès, in the run-up to the war, was more preoccupied by the standard scenario of an “imperialist” war to which the socialist answer would be an international general strike. In fact, the difficulty of organizing such a response, which would disadvantage the best-organized proletariat (namely, the German or British labor movements), paralyzed the Second International in the crucial days preceding the outbreak of war in late July and early August 1914.<sup>32</sup>

## French and British Perceptions of Germany

Following the Second Moroccan Crisis, there was increased public belief in both Germany and France that the time for attempts to secure foreign policy gains by diplomatic threat was over. Clemenceau declared to the Senate in November 1911 that France desired peace but, should it prove necessary, would respond to enemy provocation: "If war is imposed on us, we will be ready."<sup>33</sup> Poincaré's speeches as Prime Minister in 1912, and then as President of the Republic from the following year, were similarly firm and popular.<sup>34</sup>

Poincaré's policy of maintaining national security by strengthening existing military agreements with Russia and deepening the "entente" with Britain nonetheless carried increased risks. In particular, France might have to support Russia in a war even if this resulted from conflict between Austria-Hungary and Russia in the Balkans. After the war, and in the light of its catastrophic cost for all the countries concerned, a black myth was forged of *Poincaré-la-guerre* (war-mongering Poincaré), which accused him of plotting with Russia to engineer war with Germany or at least to take an unreasonably hard line that might have the same effect (see chapter 2). This is a huge exaggeration, since the essential French aim was defensive – to limit Germany's threatening behavior and to ensure that Russia stood firm without being provocative. No French government envisaged going to war to recover Alsace-Lorraine; even if the loss of the two provinces remained emotive, it was politically dead. Nonetheless, one can understand why contemporary Germans viewed Poincaré differently. Across the Rhine, he was one of the most hated French leaders, being regarded as an anti-German warmonger interested only in obtaining "revenge" for the defeat of 1871.

The German challenge to British naval superiority (with the "*Dreadnought* race"), following the First Moroccan Crisis, meant that Germany replaced France and Russia as the source of antagonism and possible war for British public opinion. Nonetheless, attempts were made to come to an agreement with Germany on colonial spheres of influence, most notably with the "mission" of Lord Haldane to Berlin in 1912, which sought to transfer Portugal's African colonies to Germany. The mission foundered on German suspicion, and when this resulted in strengthened British relations with France, this too was read in Germany as evidence that Britain had not been serious in the first place.

At the height of the First Balkan War in December 1912, the Kaiser called a "Council of War" of his naval and military chiefs at which he envisaged a European war within 18 months, including "an invasion of England on a grand scale."<sup>35</sup> Historians have failed to agree on the status of this meeting, which seems to have been a response to an immediate crisis rather than a blueprint for future policy. Nonetheless, it painted the imagined scenario of a future conflict embracing the world (through its maritime dimension) as well as Europe. This was reciprocated by the subsequent Anglo-French naval agreement by which the British concentrated their fleet in home waters, including the protection of both shores of the Channel, while the French took over responsibility for security in the Mediterranean.

## Rearmament, Eastern Europe, and the Meanings of War

Yet it was events in continental Europe rather than overseas that accentuated the expectation on the part of contemporaries that war had become unavoidable, and supplied the framework of diplomatic confrontation. The realization that *Weltpolitik* had been checked

both by the successful British response to the naval arms race and by the French protectorate in Morocco refocused German attention on the continent in 1912–13. This occurred at the very moment that nationalist politics were eroding the remains of Ottoman Turkey's power in the Balkans and, more seriously still, threatening the internal stability and external security of Germany's primary ally since 1879, the multi-ethnic Dual Monarchy of Austria-Hungary.

A first consequence of this turning point was the decision of the German government to expand the army after ten years of preference for naval expenditure. The move gained added urgency from growing fears that Russia was reviving more rapidly than anticipated from defeat and revolution in 1904–5, and that it was poised to turn Pan-Slav solidarity, notably with independent Serbia, into an alternative sphere of influence to that of Austria-Hungary in the Balkans. Any conflict in south-eastern Europe had the potential to set the two alliance systems against each other, since war between Russia and Austria would bring in France and Germany on either side, and possibly Britain as well. Perceived failure to face up to a major diplomatic challenge would have equally serious consequences for the standing and security of the major powers. Hence, a crisis in eastern or south-eastern Europe would be transmitted to all points of the system of opposed alliances, and might trigger war, unless there was a countervailing will to use the "concert of Europe" to prevent a regional conflict engulfing the continent. These were the hardening diplomatic tensions that gave the possibility of war a new actuality.

As early as December 1912, Moltke the Younger, together with Erich Ludendorff, who was at that time an unknown major on the General Staff, produced a memorandum on the need for improvements in German military strength. Amongst other demands, they included an increase of the active German army of some 300,000 men. This demand was criticized by the civilian government and eventually reduced by around 50 percent.<sup>36</sup> But it triggered an escalation in military numbers in both countries, as well as a feverish political debate on army expansion and rearmament. Although still insufficiently studied, such debates were crucial in bringing contemporaries to accept that war might occur in the near future.

The French discussion of the extension of military service from two to three years may be used to show how this occurred.<sup>37</sup> The measure, which was debated in the summer of 1913 in direct response to the expansion of the German army, deeply divided French opinion. Those in favor tended to brand their opponents as traitors or spies. The nationalist poet Charles Péguy, for example, demanded that Jaurès should be "placed against the wall," and Raoul Villain, the man who actually shot Jaurès on 31 July 1914, claimed after his arrest that he had done so in order to punish a traitor. Conversely, there was a minority of hard-core left-wing opinion that rejected any expansion on the simple grounds of "anti-imperialism."

However, the bulk of opposition to the three-year law by socialists and members of the all-important Radical Party was more nuanced. Jaurès and others opposed it not because they rejected national defense, but because they objected to strengthening the authority of the professional officer corps as opposed to the "Nation in Arms." They were also not persuaded of the imminence of war. However, enough Radicals felt sufficiently uneasy about the increase in international tensions to ensure that the measure passed by a two-thirds majority in August 1913. When the issue resurfaced in the general election in the spring of 1914, over half the deputies who were elected approved of the Three Year law, despite a swing to the socialists. The debate demonstrates that French opinion had reached a measure of agreement on the importance of defending France against a German attack, despite lingering disagreement over the length of military

service. The “Union Sacrée” of August 1914 was the result of this shared acceptance that France was a nation under threat.

The situation in Germany was similar. In the immediate prewar years, the belief that Germany had been encircled by enemy powers was deeply embedded in national discourses. The pace of rearmament by the other major powers, and the dilemma this posed for German strategic planning, made it increasingly urgent to deal with the threat of an apparently resurgent Russia, whose military capacity the German military leadership vastly overrated. The collapsing balance of power in the Balkans seemed to open the glittering prospect of expanded German influence into the declining sphere of Ottoman power, including its Middle Eastern provinces – hence the importance of the Berlin to Baghdad railway as the axis of this one remaining potential colonial domain. Yet the possibility that Austria-Hungary might collapse under the weight of demands from its own Slavic populations, fanned by independent Serbia, opened the opposite prospect of chaos and decline for Germany as well.

This is why the German government firmly supported Austria-Hungary’s hard-line approach to the emergent states in the Balkans, and especially Serbia, which pursued a policy of national expansion under the banner of Pan-Serbianism that fed on the inexorable decline of its former overlord, the Ottoman Empire. Austria-Hungary was deeply concerned by the movement for a “Great Serbia” and in order to pre-empt it once and for all, annexed Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1909. Bosnia-Herzegovina was a large multi-ethnic province with a large Serb population over which the Austrians had operated a protectorate since 1878. Germany firmly supported the Austrian coup over Bosnia-Herzegovina, whereas the Russians, still weakened by their defeat in the Russo-Japanese War, were unable to fulfill their traditional role of protector of the Slav peoples.

In the province itself and in Serbia, the Bosnian crisis of 1908–9 left a legacy of hatred and bitterness against Austria-Hungary for what was considered to be a brutal annexation. Meanwhile, Russia found it hard to re-establish its position as protector of the Slav states. For this reason, it tolerated the creation in October 1912 of the Balkan League, an offensive alliance whose aim was to wage war against Ottoman Turkey, which had been further weakened by its military defeat at the hands of Italy in Libya, its sole remaining North African province.

Russia had no choice but to support the alliance of the Balkan states. But in Germany and Austria this fostered the suspicion, and then the certainty, that Russia was promoting “Pan-Slav” objectives whose aim was nothing less than deliberately to overturn the unstable equilibrium between Austria-Hungary and the Balkan states in favor of the latter. In reality, the two Balkan wars of 1912–13 were conducted at the behest of the Balkan powers themselves, the first resulting in the seizure of Thrace and Macedonia from Ottoman Turkey, the second representing an internecine feud in which Greece, Montenegro, and Serbia deprived Bulgaria of its share of the spoils. Only the activation of the “concert” of Europe, by which the great powers prevented the generalization of a regional conflict and imposed a settlement on the participants, prevented a European war though, as we have noted, the socialist Second International at its emergency meeting at Basel and Kaiser Wilhelm II at his hastily-convened Council of War both believed at the end of 1912 that a continental conflict might be nigh. As it happened, the Treaty of London in May 1913 following the first Balkan War appeared to curb Serb ambitions by blocking its access to the Mediterranean with the creation of an Albanian state. But this result was somewhat undermined by the second Balkan War, when Serbia gained most of Macedonia at the expense of Bulgaria, nearly doubling its prewar size.<sup>38</sup>

Following the so-called “Liman von Sanders Affair” in the winter of 1913–14 international suspicions reached new levels. Sanders was a Prussian officer who assumed a high position in the Ottoman army with the goal of both modernizing it and confirming Ottoman Turkey in the German sphere of influence. The Russians were not only opposed to the modernization of the Ottoman military but they also suspected that Germany was using Turkey to gain control over the straits, thus controlling Russian access to the Mediterranean. Consequently, the Russians informed the French that they would do everything necessary to strengthen their army so that, as foreseen in the military convention between the two powers, it could undertake an operation “as simultaneously as possible” against Germany in the event of war.

Because these assurances were made in public and their contents appeared in the press, the Germans were immediately aware of the intensification of Franco-Russian cooperation, which once again appeared to confirm their encirclement. What the public did not know was that the upper echelons of the German military were also concerned at the prospect of quicker Russian mobilization, which might nullify the Schlieffen Plan with its calculation that France could be eliminated before Russia had been fully put on a war footing. This development, which might have suggested greater caution, was taken to mean “better now than later.” By the spring of 1914, the stress under which Moltke the Younger labored was palpable, as he combined the belief that action had to be taken with deep fears that it might already be too late.

### The July Crisis, 1914

By focusing on how events appeared to contemporaries, it cannot be maintained that the outbreak of war in 1914 came like a bolt from the blue, as is often still said. However, it is important to note the difference between public and press opinion in the major European states and that of their governments. By the summer of 1914 the former were less exercised by the possibility of war than in 1913, during the Second Balkan War and army expansion in Germany and France. In the early summer of 1914, the French public was far more interested in domestic political scandals than in international relations. In Germany the press campaign against Russia, which began in April 1914, achieved little in comparison with the armaments campaign of the previous year.

However, the crucial political and military actors in Germany had a different viewpoint. They immediately understood the murders of Sarajevo as an opportunity to test the strength of the enemy alliances and – if at all possible – to break Germany’s “encirclement.” Should this not prove successful, they felt that it was better to provoke war in the summer of 1914 than to wait any longer, especially as they feared that within a few years Russia would be more powerful than Germany and the Schlieffen Plan would become inapplicable. These essentially Machiavellian calculations shaped the actions of the key German decision-makers over the course of the July crisis. Whereas the British, in particular, urged the use of the concert mechanism to prevent a general conflict, as had been done the previous year in the case of the two Balkan wars, such an approach now ran counter to the aims of German leaders.

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It is beyond doubt that the German government bears the most immediate responsibility for the outbreak of the war in August 1914. It issued a blank check for Austria-Hungary to attack Serbia, guaranteeing German support even if it meant war with Russia. This

shows that the German military and political leadership intended to challenge the Franco-Russian alliance even at the price of a European war, and that for many (including Moltke the Younger), such a war was precisely the desired goal, as a means of settling the Russian “threat” for good and breaking Germany’s “encirclement.” The only major unknown factor was whether or not Britain would join in, which explains the outrage in Germany when Britain did so.<sup>39</sup>

Curiously, none of the responsible German politicians appears to have understood that they were opening a Pandora’s box. Their conviction that Germany was unjustifiably “encircled” and their view that war was a controlled means of achieving a new freedom of action combined to override any fear that the conflict would turn into a lengthy bloodbath that might transform politics and destroy the social position of those who were waging it, at home and internationally. However, the German and Austrian leaderships were not alone in this. Those who opposed them, while they might have wished for a peaceful resolution to the crisis, were also resolved to embrace war rather than accept a diplomatic coup that would destroy Serbia and diminish Russian power. The illusion that war was still, as Clausewitz had said it should be, “a continuation of policy by other means,” remained almost universal.<sup>40</sup> In August 1914, Europe as a whole stood on the brink of a catastrophe that few, if any, understood.

### Notes

- 1 Wolfgang J. Mommsen, *Das Zeitalter des Imperialismus*, Frankfurt am Main, Fischer, 1969, p. 152.
- 2 Joll, *1914: The Unspoken Assumptions*.
- 3 Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, 1832; English translation by Michael Howard and Peter Paret; Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1976; new edition, 1989, p. 76.
- 4 François Furet, *Le Passé d’une illusion. Essai sur l’idée communiste au XXe siècle*, Paris, Robert Laffont, 1995, p. 49.
- 5 Quoted in Stig Förster (ed.), *Moltke. Vom Kabinettskrieg zum Volkskrieg*, Bonn, Bouvier, 1992, p. 639.
- 6 Mommsen, “The Topos of Inevitable War,” p. 25.
- 7 Werner Jung, *August Bebel. Deutscher Patriot und internationaler Sozialist*, Pfaffenweiler, Centaurus Verlag-Gesellschaft, 1988, p. 288 et seq.
- 8 Goltz, *Nation in Arms*.
- 9 Clausewitz, *On War*, Book 1, Ch. 7.
- 10 Alfred von Schlieffen, *Alfred von Schlieffen’s Military Writings*, London, Cass, 2003, p. 204.
- 11 Gerd Krumeich, “Vorstellungen vom Krieg von 1914,” in Sönke Neitzel, ed., *1900: Zukunftsvisionen der Großmächte*, Paderborn, Schönigh, 2004, p. 173 et seq.
- 12 “Grundzüge der höheren Truppenführung” (1.1.1910), quoted in Jehuda Wallach, *Das Dogma der Vernichtungsschlacht*, Frankfurt am Main, Bernard & Graefe Verlag für Wehrwesen, 1967, p. 119.
- 13 Ardant du Picq, *Etudes sur le combat*.
- 14 Richard D. Challener, *The French Theory of the Nation in Arms*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1955; David B. Ralston, *The Army of the Republic*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1967.
- 15 Foch, *Principles of War and Conduite de la guerre*.
- 16 Louis de Grandmaison, *Deux Conférences faites aux officiers de l’état-major de l’armée (février 1911)*, Paris, Berger-Levrault, 1911, p. 69.
- 17 Quoted by Delmas, “La Guerre imaginée,” p. 50.
- 18 Howard, “Men Against Fire.”
- 19 Cosson, “Expériences de guerre du début du 20<sup>e</sup> siècle”; Hall, *Balkan Wars*.

- 20 Lindemann, *Les Doctrines darwiniennes et la guerre de 1914*.
- 21 Friedrich von Bernhardi, *Germany and the Next War*, 1912; translation from German, London, Edward Arnold, 1913, p. 103.
- 22 Ibid., p. 112.
- 23 Gerd Krumeich, “Ernest Lavisse und die Kritik an der deutschen ‘Kultur’, 1914–1918,” in Wolfgang J. Mommsen, ed., *Kultur und Krieg. Die Rolle der Intellektuellen, Künstler und Schriftsteller im Ersten Weltkrieg*, Munich, Oldenbourg 1996, pp. 143–54.
- 24 Mommsen, “The Topos of Inevitable War,” p. 24.
- 25 Ibid., p. 26.
- 26 Fischer, *War of Illusions*; Chickering, *We Men Who Feel Most German*.
- 27 Reichstag speech, 14 November 1906. On “encirclement” see Gerd Krumeich, “Einkreisung. Zur Entstehung und Bedeutung eines politischen Schlagwortes,” in *Sprache und Literatur in Wissenschaft und Unterricht*, 20, 1989, pp. 99–104.
- 28 “Russia’s Transition to Pseudo-Constitutionalism,” in Max Weber, *The Russian Revolutions* (1906), ed. Gordon C. Wells and Peter Baehr, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1995, p. 233.
- 29 On the Agadir Crisis, see Geoffrey Barraclough, *From Agadir to Armageddon. Anatomy of a Crisis*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1982; Jean-Claude Allain, *Agadir: une crise impérialiste en Europe pour la conquête du Maroc*, Paris, Université de Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne, 1976.
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- 31 Haupt, *Socialism and the Great War*, p. 90.
- 32 Jaurès, *L’Armée nouvelle*; Goldberg, *Jean Jaurès*; Joll, *Second International*, pp. 161–86.
- 33 Georges Bonnefous, *Histoire politique de la Troisième République*, vol. 1, *L’Avant-guerre (1906–1914)*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1965, p. 281.
- 34 Krumeich, *Armaments and Politics*, ch. 1; Weber, *Nationalist Revival*, pp. 129–30; John Keiger, *Raymond Poincaré*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 145–63.
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- 36 Cf Stig Förster, *Der doppelte Militarismus. Die deutsche Heeresrüstungspolitik zwischen Status-quo-Sicherung und Aggression 1890–1913*, Stuttgart, Franz Steiner, 1985; Michael Geyer, *Deutsche Rüstungspolitik 1860–1980*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1984.
- 37 Krumeich, *Armaments and Politics*.
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- 39 Stibbe, *German Anglophobia*, pp. 10–47.
- 40 Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 87.

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