

THE ORIGINS OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

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The Greek historian Thucydides, in his history of that catastrophe to ancient civilization when Spartan militarism triumphed over Athenian democracy, makes the distinction between the more remote or underlying, and the immediate, causes of war. It is the distinction between the gradual accumulation of flammable material which has been heaped up through a long period of years and the final spark which starts the conflagration. The distinction is a good one. It is equally applicable to the World War. Failure to observe it has often led to confusion of thought in regard to responsibility for the war, since responsibility for the underlying causes does not always coincide with responsibility for the immediate causes. One country may for years have been much to blame for creating a general situation dangerous to peace, but may have had relatively little to do with the final outbreak of war—or *vice versa*. . . .

Obviously, no single volume can hope to deal thoroughly with all these complex and interrelated factors which constitute the underlying causes of the World War. They may be conveniently grouped under five heads:

- (a) the system of secret alliances,
- (b) militarism,
- (c) nationalism,
- (d) economic imperialism, and
- (e) the newspaper press.

THE SYSTEM OF SECRET ALLIANCES

The greatest single underlying cause of the war was the system of secret alliances which developed after the Franco-Prussian War. It gradually divided Europe into two hostile groups of powers who were increasingly suspicious of one another and who steadily built up greater and greater armies and navies. Though this system of alliances in one sense tended to preserve peace, inasmuch as the members within one group often held their friends or allies in restraint for fear of becoming involved in war themselves, the system also made it inevitable that if war did come, it would involve all the Great Powers of Europe. The members of each group felt bound to support each other, even in matters where they had no direct interest, because failure to give support would have weakened the solidarity of the group. Thus, Germany often felt bound to back up Austria-Hungary in her Balkan policies, because otherwise Germany feared to lose her only thoroughly dependable ally. Similarly, France had no direct political interests in the Balkans, but felt bound to back up Russia, because otherwise the existence of the Dual Alliance would have been threatened, the balance of power destroyed, and the best guarantee of French safety from a German attack would have been lost. Likewise, the officials of the British Foreign Office became increasingly convinced that England must support France and Russia in order to preserve the solidarity of the Triple Entente as a check to the Triple Alliance. In the crisis of July, 1914, it was not, merely a question of Austria, Serbia and the Balkans; it was a question, of the solidarity and prestige of the two groups of Powers into which Europe had become divided.

As one reads the new *British Documents*, one is struck by the emphasis on this necessity of preserving the solidarity of the Triple Entente. As Sir Eyre Crowe noted in a "minute" early in the crisis: "It is clear that France and Russia are decided to accept the challenge thrown out to them. Whatever we may think of the merits of the Austrian charges against Serbia, France and Russia consider that these are the pretexts, and that the bigger cause of Triple Alliance versus Triple Entente is definitely engaged. I think it would be impolitic, not to say dangerous, for England to attempt to controvert this opinion, or to endeavor to obscure the plain issue, by any representation at St. Petersburg and Paris. . . . Our interests are tied up with those of France and Russia in this struggle, which is not for the possession of Serbia, but one between Germany aiming at a political dictatorship in Europe and the Powers who desire to retain individual freedom." It was stated more bluntly by Herr Zimmermann to the British Ambassador in Berlin on August 1, when he saw with excited regret that Germany, France, and perhaps England, would be drawn into a war which none of them wanted: "It all came from this damn system of alliances, which was the curse of modern times."

In view of the fatal consequences of this system of secret alliances in 1914, and of the fact that there has recently appeared much new material throwing light upon it, an attempt to sketch in outline its development will be made in the three following chapters. As indicated above, many of the documents and memoirs dealing with the immediate causes of the war contain also material on the earlier period. But the most important single contribution to our fuller knowledge of the growth of the system of secret alliances is the great set of new German diplomatic documents covering the years from 1871 to 1914. This consists of the most secret instructions sent by Bismarck and his successors to the German Ambassadors abroad, their reports to the German Foreign Office, and the secret papers exchanged between the German Emperor and his Foreign Office officials. It includes exceedingly interesting marginal notes on documents from the hand of Bismarck, and later from that of William II. Bismarck's notes reveal the Iron Chancellor's innermost thoughts on foreign policy. They formed the basis of instructions sent by the German Foreign Office to the ambassadors abroad. William II's marginal notes, which are more numerous, more emotional, and often merely indicative of the mood of the moment, are interesting as a study of the psychology of the imperial mind, but exercised somewhat less directive influence upon the German Foreign Office than did Bismarck's masterly notes. From this collection of documents one sees that the German Foreign Office did not always completely inform William II on all matters and often made its will prevail over his preferences. So far as one can judge, *Die Grosse Politik* is fairly complete within the limits set by the editors, and aims at giving the basis for an honest and detailed picture of German foreign policy from the Franco-Prussian War to the World War. But we still lack any equally comprehensive publication from the archives of France, Russia, and the other countries, which may be used to check and balance these German documents. Very recently, however, similar admirable collections of documents have been, or are being, officially issued: *Austria-Hungary's Foreign Policy, 1908-1914*; *British Documents on the Origins of the War, 1898-1914*; and the *French Diplomatic Documents, 1871-1914*.

Professor Pribram's invaluable edition of *The Secret Treaties of Austria-Hungary, 1879-1914*, made possible for the first time a satisfactory study of the Triple Alliance treaties and their evolution from a purely defensive system into one which was used for aggressive purposes by Italy and Austria.

The Bolshevik *Materials for the History of Franco-Russian Relations from 1910 to 1914*, mentioned above, contains much of the correspondence between the Russian Foreign Office and the Russian Embassy in Paris during the four years before the war. It enables one to see how Izvolski and Poincaré were transforming the Franco-Russian alliance from its originally defensive character into a potentially aggressive combination to support Russian ambitions in the Balkans. Much of this material has been made easily accessible to Western readers in Rene Marchand's *Livre Noir*. It has been further completed by some five hundred additional letters and telegrams of Izvolski's correspondence, which have been published in German translation by Friedrich Stieve. Parallel to this Paris-St. Petersburg correspondence, supplementing and confirming it, is the London-St. Petersburg correspondence of Count Benckendorff for the years 1908-1914. His letters and other secret papers were clandestinely copied by B. von Siebert, a counselor in the Russian Embassy at London. They were apparently sold or conveyed to German authorities, and published by von Siebert in a German edition in 1921. They have been conveniently rearranged and published in English translation by G.A. Schreiner, *Entente Diplomacy and the World* (1921). They show the efforts of Russia and France to strengthen the friendship with England and to tighten the bonds of the Triple Entente into a combination which should be firm and powerful enough to defy the Triple Alliance, if necessary.

From the French archives, a few documents were published by Professors Bourgeois and Pages, as a French Senate Report on *Les Origines et Les Responsabilites de la Grande Guerre*. But these French documents are few and meager as compared with the German, Austrian and Russian publications, and are selected to prove a case, rather than to furnish historians with material for study. More valuable are the French *Yellow Books* containing documents on such special subjects as the *Franco-Russian Alliance* and *Balkan Affairs, 1912-1914*, though these are clearly far from complete.

MILITARISM

A second underlying cause of the war, closely connected with the system of secret alliances, was militarism. The word is often used vaguely. But usually it includes at least two definite conceptions. First, the dangerous and burdensome mechanism of great standing armies and large navies, with the attendant evils of espionage, suspicion, fear, and hatred. Second, the existence of a powerful class of military and naval officers, headed by the General Staff, who tend to dominate, especially at a time of political crisis, over the civilian authorities.

The system of great armies, embracing the larger part of the male population capable of bearing arms, began with the French during the Revolution and under Napoleon. It was extended and efficiently developed by the Prussians in the War of Liberation. As a result of its success in the victories of Moltke and Bismarck in the Wars of 1864, '66 and '70, it came to be esteemed and imitated in the rest of Continental Europe. From the Franco-Prussian War onwards the military and naval armaments of all the Great Powers tended to grow larger and larger, and the financial burden became heavier and heavier. Armaments were alleged to be for defense and in the interests of peace, according to the fallacious maxim, *si vis pacem, para bellum*. They were intended to produce a sense of security. That was the argument used in getting from legislatures the necessary grants of money. What they really did produce was universal suspicion, fear, and hatred between nations. If one country increased its army, built strategic railways, and constructed new battleships, its fearful neighbors were straightway frightened into doing likewise. So the mad competition in armaments went on in a vicious circle.

This was especially the case during and after the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913, when it seemed that the Great Powers might be involved. It was also accentuated by the system of alliances. Germany and Austria, uncertain of Italy's loyalty, believed they must increase their armaments to secure their own safety. France urged Russia to increase her army and build strategic railways against Germany, and readily loaned her half a billion francs on condition that it be spent for these purposes. Russia urged France to extend the term of French military service from two to three years. "Russia is ready; France must be also," declared the Russian Minister of War in an alarming newspaper article early in 1914. So armaments were increased, not only to give security to an individual country, but also to strengthen the alliance to which it belonged.

Militarism implied also the existence of an influential body of military and naval officers, whose whole psychological outlook was naturally colored by the possibility, if not the "inevitability," of an early war. To these professional fighters, war held out the prospect of quick promotion and great distinction. It would, however, be a grave injustice to them to imply that they urged war for selfish motives of personal advancement. Nevertheless, the opportunity to put into practice the results of the work of preparation for war to which their lives were devoted cannot have failed to have its psychological effect. Quite aside from any personal motives, the military officers in all countries had a high sense of national honor and patriotic duty, as they understood it. It was their supreme duty to be ready at any moment to protect the state by force of arms. It was the constant preoccupation, day and night, of the General Staff in every country to be ready to make or meet an attack in the shortest possible time. To this end every General Staff drew up or revised every year the most minute and complete plans for mobilization and march to the frontier to satisfy all possible contingent situations. Military officers generally held to the theory that it was advantageous to take the offensive. This meant striking the foe before his mobilization was complete—at the moment, therefore, when the enemy country was in the most vulnerable process of transforming itself from a peace to a war footing. It meant also that the war, with all its frightful economic devastation and demoralizing political and psychological effects, would be carried on in the enemy's country instead of within one's own frontiers. In a political crisis, therefore, the military leaders were always quick to conclude that war was "inevitable," and exerted all their influence to persuade the ruling civilian authorities to consent to an order for general mobilization at the earliest possible moment, in order to gain the advantage of the offensive. But a general mobilization, according to prevailing military opinion, actually did make war inevitable. It was a process virtually impossible to halt when once begun. This was one of the greatest evils of militarism. It is always at a crisis, precisely when it is most difficult for diplomats to keep their heads clear and their hands free, that militarist leaders exert their influence to hasten decisions for war, or get the upper hand altogether.

Another evil of militarism was the fact that the plans of the General Staff were technical and were worked out and guarded in such absolute secrecy. Not only were they unknown to Parliament and the public; they were often not even known to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, or at least their details and significance were not grasped by him. Sir Edward Grey says that between 1906 and 1911 he knew nothing of the plans which the English and French military authorities were working out for Anglo-French military cooperation in Northern France.

As to the negotiations between the Anglo-Russian naval authorities in the spring of 1914, he likewise writes: "I never enquired at the Admiralty afterwards, but I imagine the practical result of the consultations between the two naval authorities was not great. . . . [In the Siebert documents they] are constantly referred to as 'conventions.' How the military and naval authorities themselves described them, I do not know." Similarly, in Russia, it is clear that M. Sazonov did not at first grasp the fact that the plans of the militarists made a "partial mobilization" against Austria a piece of folly, if not a downright impossibility. And in Germany Herr von Bethmann-Hollweg never envisaged clearly the implications of the Schlieffen-Moltke plan to attack France through Belgium, although he was probably aware of it, according to Ludendorff, as early as 1912.

This then was another evil of militarism. The General Staffs worked out in absolute secrecy the plans which they calculated to be best adapted to bring military victory, regardless of the political implications which they might thereby impose on the civilian authorities. And when war became "inevitable," there was tremendous pressure upon the civilians to accept the arrangements which the militarists had long planned in secret. The militarist mind was much the same in all the countries, but there was a difference as to the extent to which the military and civilian authorities exercised control. General Joffre, in 1912, precisely like the German strategists, urged the strategic necessity of disregarding Belgian neutrality; but while Moltke was allowed to build his whole plan of campaign upon this violation of a treaty which Bethmann was helpless to avert if war came, M. Poincaré was strong enough and shrewd enough to veto General Joffre's views. He realized the bad effect it would have on public opinion in England, and the danger that it might cause the British Government to make use of its stipulated freedom to withhold armed aid.

Closely akin to this influence of military and naval officers was the pressure exerted on civilian authorities by munitions makers and "big business."

Some militarists believed in "preventive" war—the waging of a war upon a neighbor while he was still weak, in order to prevent him growing stronger later on. So it is often alleged that Germany wanted war in 1914, in order to have a final reckoning with Slavdom before Russia should have completed her "Great Program" of military reorganization in 1916 or 1917. M. Poincaré and his associates are alleged to have wanted war in 1914 before Germany grew any stronger by reason of her rapidly increasing population, wealth, and naval force, and also before French Socialists, revolting against the burden of French military expenditure, should repeal the recently voted three-year term of service. For the same reasons Russian militarists are said to have wanted war sooner rather than later. England even is often said to have been glad of the opportunity to crush the growing German navy before it should become a greater menace to that of England. Though here and there some individual military and naval officers in most countries may have held such views, the present writer does not think that the militarist doctrine of preventive war was a decisive factor in causing the World War. Only in Austria-Hungary did it exercise a strong influence on state policy; here it was generally felt that a conflict with Serbia must come sooner or later, and, as Baron Conrad repeatedly urged, the sooner the better. The murder of the Heir to the Throne was eagerly seized upon as a good excuse for trampling upon the Greater Serbia danger.

Nor is there any more substantial truth in the common assertion that the German authorities welcomed war as a means of crushing the rising tide of socialism, than there is in the similar assertion that Russia welcomed war as a good way of putting an end to workingmen's strikes and revolutionary unrest.

Generally speaking, it may be said that this aspect of militarism—the influence of the military upon the civilian authorities—was a serious matter in the three eastern monarchies of Germany, Austria, and Russia. It was much less in France, and virtually non-existent in England, where civilian ministers were ordinarily in charge of the army and navy.

We shall have something more to say about militarism and navalism in connection with the system of alliances.

NATIONALISM

Nationalism, whose essence and development have recently been so admirably analyzed by a distinguished American historian, must be accounted one of the major underlying causes of the war. In its chronic form of Pan-Germanism, Pan-Slavism and *revanche*, it nourished hatred between Germany and her two neighbors on the East and West. It worked in curious and devious ways. It had contributed happily to the unification of Germany and Italy. On the other hand, it had disrupted the Ottoman Empire and threatened to disrupt the Hapsburg Monarchy. In its virulent form, it had contributed for a century to a series of wars for national liberation and unity in the Balkans. It was such an important factor in the Balkan situation and led so directly to the immediate occasion of the World War that some account of it in this corner of Europe will be given below in the chapter on Balkan Problems.

ECONOMIC IMPERIALISM

Economic imperialism embraces a series of international rivalries which resulted in large part from the Industrial Revolution in England and its subsequent introduction into the other great countries of the world. It led to quantity production of goods which in turn involved the struggle for new markets and new sources of raw materials. It resulted in a great increase of population, part of which sought to immigrate to the still unoccupied regions of the world, thereby sharpening the colonial rivalry of the Great Powers. It brought about the accumulation of capital which sought investment abroad, thus leading to economic exploitation and political competition. In consequence of these and other factors, the Great Powers began to partition Africa among themselves, to secure territory or exclusive spheres of influence in China, and to build railroads in Turkey and elsewhere. This struggle for markets, raw materials, and colonies became more acute during the last quarter of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, owing to the fact that Germany and Italy entered the competition. Hitherto politically weak and divided, they had now secured national unity and wished to come forward to share with the other powers in the partitioning of the world. It can hardly be said that any one of the Great Powers was more responsible than another for the international jealousies and friction which arose out of this economic imperialism. By 1914, all the Great European Powers had secured slices of Africa. In China, Italy only had failed to gain something for herself.

In the matter of railway construction, which was one of the most important forms of economic imperialism because it involved political as well as economic interests, one sees the English building the Cape-to-Cairo railway, the Russians the Trans-Siberian, and the Germans the so-called Bagdad Railway. The first of these came into conflict with German, Belgian and French ambitions; the second was partly responsible for the Russo-Japanese War; the third caused endless suspicions and friction between Germany and the Triple Entente.

Protective tariffs which usually accompanied the modern industrial system, except in England, were another form of economic imperialism. "Tariff wars" and retaliatory measures caused irritation between countries, especially in the mind of the man in the street and in newspaper discussion. There was always the danger that great merchants and industrialists would use official government support to secure economic advantages for themselves. This tended to bring governments into conflict with one another.

Generally speaking, however, this economic imperialism is usually exaggerated as one of the underlying causes of the war. It is often said, for instance, that the industrial development of Germany, and the jealousy with which it was regarded by England, made a war between these two countries "inevitable" sooner or later. This, however, is an unsound view. It arises from the fact that economic rivalry tends to become exaggerated in the mind of the public, because it is a subject which touches the pockets of wide classes, and is more generally discussed and perhaps understood than other questions like secret treaties, militarism, or nationalism. It often happens that great merchants or industrialists own or control newspapers which are selfishly interested in contributing to the exaggeration of these economic questions. But if one reads the diplomatic correspondence of the years before the war, one is struck by the relatively slight importance which is given to these economic rivalries which haunt so largely the mind of the average business man and newspaper editor. It is not so much questions of economic rivalry as those of prestige, boundaries, armies and navies, the Balance of Power, a possible shifting in the system of alliances, which provoke reams of diplomatic correspondence and raise the temperature in Foreign Offices to the danger point.

THE NEWSPAPER PRESS

Another underlying cause of the war was the poisoning of public opinion by the newspaper press in all of the great countries. This is a subject which is only beginning to receive the careful investigation which it deserves.

Too often newspapers in all lands were inclined to inflame nationalistic feelings, misrepresent the situation in foreign countries, and suppress factors in favor of peace. In the diplomatic correspondence of the forty years before the war there were innumerable cases in which governments were eager to establish better relations and secure friendly arrangements, but were hampered by the jingoistic attitude of the newspapers in their respective countries. Ambassadors and Cabinet Ministers frequently admitted the senseless attitude of the leading newspapers in their own country, apologized for it and promised to exert themselves to restrain it, if only the other government would do the same toward its press. These were often quite genuine efforts and may frequently be seen in Anglo-German relations in the quarter of a century before the war.

At other times, however, Ministers sought to score an advantage or to defend their attitude by alleging that their freedom of action was restricted because of the press and public opinion—that if they yielded the point under dispute there would be such a howl from the newspapers and the public that they would be turned out of office. Such allegations are sometimes true, but more often they are not, particularly in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, where the government was generally able to exercise a greater control over the press than in England. It is, nevertheless, true that the newspapers of two countries often took up some point of dispute, exaggerated it, and made attacks and counter-attacks, until a regular newspaper war was engendered, which thoroughly poisoned public opinion, and so offered a fertile soil in which the seeds of real war might easily germinate. A particularly good example of this is to be seen in the press feud carried on between Austria and Serbia in the weeks following the murder of the Archduke Ferdinand. Here was a case in which the governments of both countries, instead of apologizing for their press or trying to restrain it, deliberately allowed the newspapers to incite public opinion and fire it to an indignation and enthusiasm for war. It would, perhaps, be too much to say that, had it not been for this Austro-Serbian newspaper feud, the war might have been averted. But it is true that the violence of the Serbian press was one of the determining factors which led Count Tisza to change his opinion and to accept war with Serbia, whereas at first he had been stubbornly opposed to it; and without his consent Count Berchtold and the militarists could not have made war on Serbia.

There is a vast literature on freedom of the press, censorship of the press, slander and libel, and the professional aspects of journalism, but there is very little sound writing on the relations of the press to governmental control and on its influence in fomenting national hatreds and war. It is to be hoped that some careful scholars will turn their attention to this problem of the influence of the newspaper press as one of the underlying causes of the war. Bismarck's oft-quoted remark is even truer for the generation immediately preceding the World War than for his own: "Every country is held at some time to account for the windows broken by its press; the bill is presented, some day or other, in the shape of hostile sentiment in the other country."

The first two, *Rise and fall Of the Third Reich* and *Paris 1919*, only threw clues and inferences. Also know I have a library of read material related to the subject but such material was not necessarily read to answer this single question. I was hoping, from the author's credentials as college professor and historian, to get something more absolute from this one. While I gained a lot of insight and can now start to draw my own conclusions I hate to say it but I am leaning towards the view of the French, which is always to be fearful of the German propensity for dominion. I am leaning with [4] Sean McMeekin, *The Russian Origins of the First World War* (Cambridge, Mass., Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), idem, *July 1914. Countdown to War* (Cambridge, Mass., Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013); Stefan Schmidt, *Frankreichs Außenpolitik in der Julikrise 1914* (Munich, Oldenbourg 2007). Her research focuses on the origins of the First World War and Imperial Germany, and her publications include *Helmuth von Moltke and the Origins of the First World War*, Cambridge University Press, 2001, *The Origins of the First World War. Controversies and Consensus*, Longman, 2002, and *The origins of the First World War: diplomatic and military documents*, Manchester University Press, 2013.