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Great Power rivalry and the World War, 1900–17

Introduction

Europeans lived in relative peace in the nineteenth century, although the recent upheavals that had racked the continent loomed large. After the revolution of 1789, France had exploded with a seemingly unbounded potential for ideological war and after 1804 Napoleon had harnessed this power to destroy the independence and security of the **Great Powers** and to make France the master of all continental Europe. Undisputedly Napoleon possessed a genius for war, but eventually he overreached himself both militarily and politically, and Britain, Austria, Prussia and Russia prevailed on the battlefield. The Congress of Vienna of 1814–15 founded a lasting peace based on Great Power management of international politics and moderation in the pursuit of self-interest. This management was not perfect, for national antagonism and egotism did not evaporate and war remained an instrument of policy. The general peace was broken by the Crimean War of 1853–56, and then by the three wars of Italian and German unification between 1859 and 1871. Yet these Great Power conflicts were limited in scope and fought for limited objectives, and once these objectives were achieved, order was restored. After the ‘long’ peace of 1815–54 came that of 1871–1914.

As a consequence, by the end of the century, Europe dominated the globe. Of course other factors played an essential part: Europe possessed the population size, the machine power and a massive organizational and technological edge over

Great Powers

Traditionally those states that were held capable of shared responsibility for the management of the international order by virtue of their military and economic influence.

its rivals. But stability at home permitted the impulses of the so-called ‘new imperialism’ to translate steam engines, machine guns and administration into supremacy abroad. In the 1880s and 1890s, these impulses ushered in not only the ‘scramble for Africa’, but also competition to extend empire in Persia, South-East Asia and the Pacific. Europe’s commercial, intellectual and cultural influence also spread. Under this corrosive pressure, the last great non-European empires, Qing China and Ottoman Turkey, crumbled, while Europeans planned partition. Afghanistan and Siam remained in part independent because they served as useful buffers between the Russian and British and the British and French imperial spheres of influence. Japan escaped European domination through modernization: after 1868 Japan was transformed into a quasi-European power – through the adoption of modern Western financial, military and industrial methods. Even so, the European Great Powers called the shots. When Japan defeated China in 1894–95, the Europeans intervened to rein the Japanese in and to take for themselves some of the spoils at China’s expense.

Unfortunately, the legacy of one century proved to be short lived in the next. If 1815–54 and 1871–1914 are the conspicuous features of the nineteenth century, then the two world wars and the Cold War blot the twentieth. Europe lost its capacity to contain inter-state violence just when the process of modernization handed Europeans an unprecedented capacity to wage **total war**. The killing machine of 1914–18 was the result. Between the wars, the European system lurched forward slowly, as political **isolationism** and revolution preoccupied America and Russia. The coming of Hitler’s war finally extinguished the European system, and with it European world primacy. The Soviet Union and the United States emerged as superpowers. Their ideological, strategic and economic rivalry began in Central Europe but quickly spread beyond, drawing in revolutionary China and the newly independent states of Africa, Asia and the Middle East. The German question disturbed the peace intermittently, but only as one front in a global Cold War. Until 1989, Germany, like the European continent as a whole, remained split between the two hostile coalitions. Europe enjoyed another ‘long peace’, but not on its own terms. Only after the USSR collapsed did Europeans begin to reshape the political landscape without the boundaries drawn by the world wars.

To understand why the European era of international politics came to an end requires an answer to why the nineteenth-century states system broke down in the first decade and a half of the twentieth. Before addressing this question, however, it will be helpful to set out some of the terms and concepts essential to an understanding of the history of Great Power relations.

The Great Powers, power politics and the states system

Only five European states undisputedly held Great Power status when the twentieth century opened – Britain, France, Germany, Austria-Hungary and Russia. The statesmen of 1815 would have recognized this arrangement, although Germany

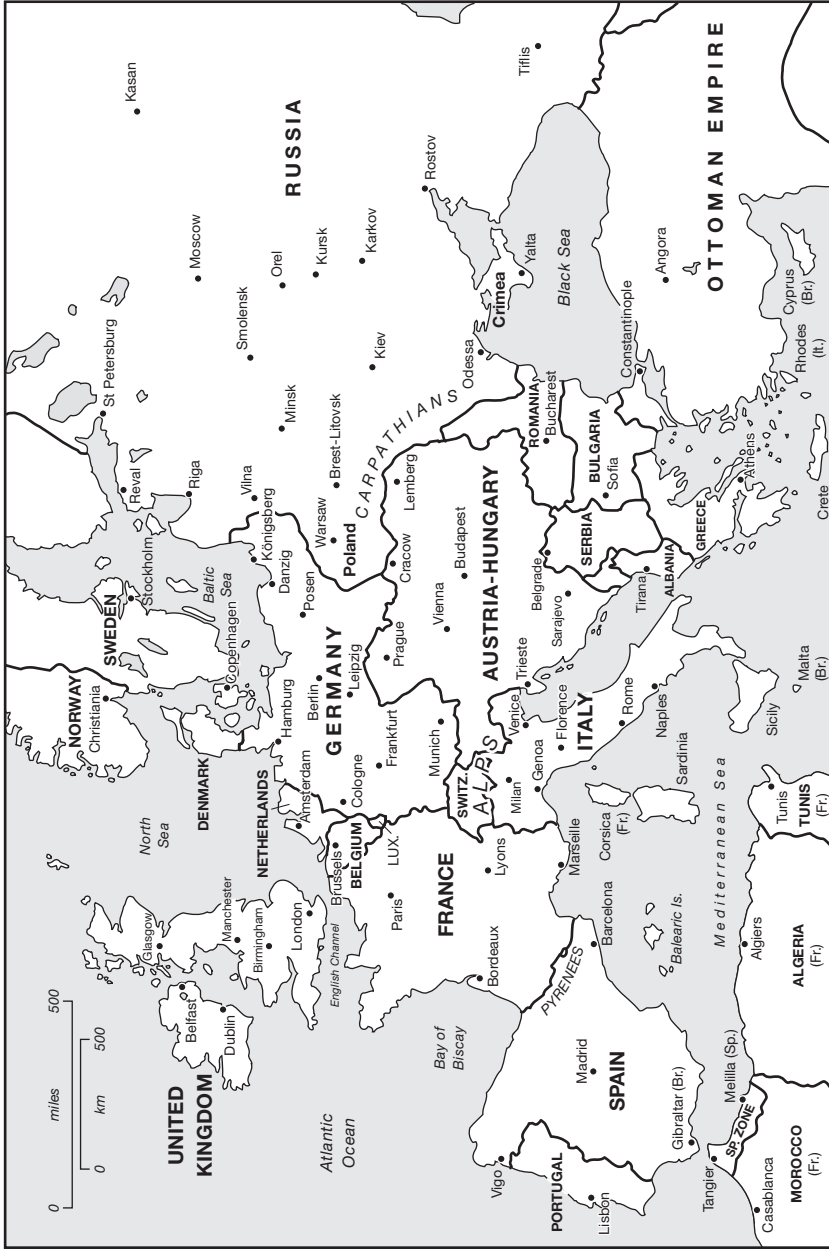
total war

A war that uses all resources at a state’s disposal including the complete mobilization of both the economy and society.

isolationism

The policy or doctrine of isolating one’s country by avoiding foreign entanglements and responsibilities. Popular in the United States during the inter-war years.

see Map 1.1



Map 1.1 Europe in 1914

Source: After Rich (1992)

(then Prussia) had greatly expanded its power and that of Austria (Austria-Hungary after 1867) had shrunk just as swiftly. At the crudest level, the term ‘Great Power’ applied to those states with the greatest capacity for war. Here, in the calculations of diplomats and strategists, the *hard* currency of power counted: size of population, territory, finance and industrial output.

On this scale the five did not measure up equally, and clear-cut comparisons are problematic. Russia had by far the largest population, but Britain, France and Germany had large literate urban populations and this pool of educated workers and soldiers helped to offset numbers in the era of machine production and complex weapons. Still, mass conscript armies recruited on the basis of universal military service required numbers: by 1900, Russia called up 335,000 men annually, Germany 280,000, France 250,000, Austria-Hungary 103,000 and Italy 100,000. Because of the low birth rate in France, its military planners looked on with unease at the growth of Germany’s population. Austria-Hungary suffered another problem – its birth rate was fastest in the backward regions of the empire. France and Britain could call upon their empires for reserves, but the wisdom of the day assumed rapid mobilization and decisive opening battles, in which there would be no time to train colonial levies. Britain, at any rate, with its far-flung maritime empire, did not adopt conscription but instead concentrated on its fleet. Although unable to match the British, all the Great Powers assembled modern battle fleets in the years before 1914, partly in response to real threats, but also as symbols of their place in the first rank of states. Great Power armies required a large manpower pool and high birth rates; battleships, modern field weapons and railways required heavy industry. Britain and France produced coal and steel in quantities appropriate to their Great Power status, even if Germany began to dwarf them both, as well as Russia, by 1914. Austria-Hungary, Berlin’s chief ally, exceeded only Italy in its industrial output. Following unification in 1861, Italy regarded itself as a contender for Great Power status, but while moving steadily towards demographic equality with a declining France, it nonetheless lacked the necessary levels of literacy, secure coal supplies, railways and productive capacity to bear this title with confidence.

see Table 1.1

Table 1.1 Total populations of the Great Powers, 1890–1913 (millions)

| | 1890 | 1900 | 1910 | 1913 |
|-----------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Russia | 116.8 | 135.6 | 159.3 | 175.1 |
| United States | 62.6 | 75.9 | 91.9 | 97.3 |
| Germany | 49.2 | 56.0 | 64.5 | 66.9 |
| Austria-Hungary | 42.6 | 46.7 | 50.8 | 52.1 |
| Japan | 39.9 | 43.8 | 49.1 | 51.3 |
| France | 38.3 | 38.9 | 39.5 | 39.7 |
| Britain | 37.4 | 41.1 | 44.9 | 45.6 |
| Italy | 30.0 | 32.2 | 34.4 | 35.1 |

Source: Adapted from Kennedy (1988, p. 255)

The ability to generate revenue in order to purchase armaments, train soldiers and build railways was another important power indicator. Once again, clear-cut comparisons are problematic. A look at defence spending in the decade before 1914 indicates that all five Great Powers had the financial strength to enter into an arms race. Germany and Russia, in terms of absolute outlay, outpaced the rest, with Britain and France holding their own. Austria-Hungary stayed ahead of Italy, but could not keep up with the big players. Britain spent far more than any other Great

see Figure 1.1

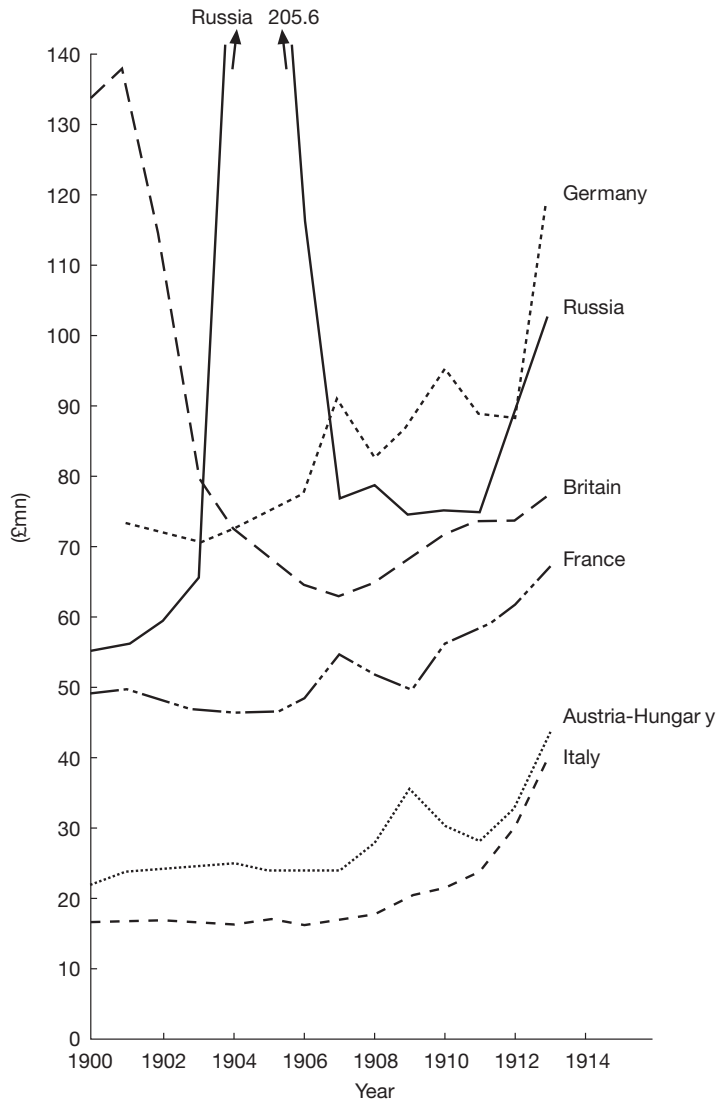


Figure 1.1 Defence expenditure of the European Great Powers, 1900–13

Source: D. Stevenson (1996)

Note: The high levels of defence expenditure in 1900–02 for Britain reflect the costs of the Boer War, while the high levels in 1904–05 for Russia reflect those of the Russo-Japanese War.

Power on warships, while on land Russia, Germany and France ('a poor third') not surprisingly dominated. Other important differences existed. Britain, France and Germany, the states with the highest per capita income, spent much more of their national wealth on defence than Russia (though it was in absolute terms still a giant) and Italy, which could not bear a similar burden. Although France did not spend as much as Germany, the financial assistance it extended to St Petersburg proved significant in speeding up Russia's economic and military development after 1905. Indeed, paradoxically enough, despite the impressive steel output and undisputed wealth in the years before 1914, the German government had reached the limits of what its fiscal and political structure could raise for defence.

However, *formal* recognition of Great Power status resulted not just from statistical reckoning but also from inclusion in the inner circle of diplomacy, especially the drafting of the general peace treaties and territorial adjustments. Normally the rights of Great Powers could not be neglected in international affairs, while smaller states were routinely ignored and subject to Great Power management. Like the rules of any club, diplomatic etiquette reflected the 'pecking order'. The heads of state and foreign ministers of the Great Powers met at congresses (the last in 1878), not conferences; generally only they exchanged ambassadors (diplomatic officials of the highest rank), not ministers. Nonetheless, diplomatic practice also accommodated the fuzziness of these distinctions. One might be invited into the Great Power club even without the hard credentials of membership. Italy was a 'courtesy' Great Power. The Powers treated Italy like a Great Power in an effort to entice Rome into one alliance or another. Similarly, after 1892, the Great Powers upgraded their representatives in Washington to ambassadors. In 1895, Britain deferred to the **Monroe Doctrine** over the Venezuelan border dispute. By 1900 the United States also had a formidable industrial economy. Yet, though treated as a 'courtesy' Great Power – the Americans participated in the conference on equatorial Africa in 1884–85 – even Italy carried more political weight where it counted most, that is, in Europe.

Notwithstanding the importance of armed strength, military success alone was not enough to allow a state to join the top rank. In 1898 the United States forced the Spanish out of Cuba and the Philippines. Spain, however, with little industrial and financial muscle, pulled no weight in Europe. At best, the victory only confirmed the United States as a regional power in the Western Hemisphere. Even so, in 1902–03, when Britain, Germany and Italy sent warships to force Venezuela to make good on debt payments, the Americans discovered that they lacked the military, economic or diplomatic means to forestall European gunboat diplomacy. In Italy's case its humiliating defeat in Africa at the hands of Abyssinian (Ethiopian) tribesmen at Adowa in 1896 confirmed its reputation as 'the least of the Great Powers', and the conquest of Libya in 1911 from the Ottomans did little to overturn this impression. The Russo-Japanese war of 1904–05 illustrates another case. The war originated from a clash of rival ambitions to dominate Manchuria and Korea. Japan struck first, with a surprise attack on the Russians at Port Arthur, followed up by a series of rapid victories over the inefficient Russian armies along the Yalu River and in Manchuria. In May 1905, with superior gunnery, the Japanese navy annihilated the Russians at the Battle of Tsushima.

Monroe Doctrine

The doctrine declared by President James Monroe in 1823 in which he announced that the United States would not tolerate intervention by the European Powers in the affairs of the Western Hemisphere.

Europe saw the Japanese triumph and the resulting revolution in Russia as degrading Russian power and causing an elevation of Japan's standing. Yet St Petersburg was down but not out. Given Russia's *reputation* as a first-rate power, everyone understood that with time Russia would again exercise its strength.

The inexact relationship between military potential and international status can in part be explained by the elusive nature of power. Statesmen form perceptions of the relative strength of other states based on multiple sources of information, everything from newspapers and personal experiences to secret intelligence. This information is compiled and filtered through complex bureaucracies which are no less subject to human error and bias. Statesmen may strive to form concrete judgements about the realities of international power, but these judgements are frequently inconclusive or wrong. For example, apart from Japan's ally, Britain, European governments generally underestimated Japanese power before the 1904–05 war. What changed afterwards was not the *reality* of Japanese power (military efficiency, population and armaments) but European *perceptions* of it. Even if the problem of perception could be overcome, power would remain a slippery concept. It is not reducible to 'military capacity', measured by plotting industrial output, manpower and finance. All forms of power must be weighed in relation to potential challenges. It must operate within a geographical, political, intellectual and even cultural context, and must be projected over time and space.

Take, for instance, the security situation of Austria-Hungary, a multinational state encompassing Germans, Magyars, Romanians, Italians, Slovaks, Croatians, Czechs, Serbs, Slovenes, Ruthenians and Poles, all united under the Habsburg monarchy. It had survived the Napoleonic Wars as a Great Power and thereafter acted as a key enforcer of the European order. It also united much of Central and South-Eastern Europe under one dynasty, thus providing a useful check to Russian ambitions in the region. Indeed, the empire's survival can be partly explained by the fact that the other Powers had recognized that its collapse would spark a crisis fatal to European stability and peace. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the rise of nationalism and national **self-determination** – exemplified by German and Italian unification – placed strains on the empire's precarious political and economic ties. In an effort to solve the problem, the *Ausgleich* (compromise) of 1867 reconstituted the empire into two autonomous states under Emperor Franz Josef – in Austria, Germans would dominate the subject nationalities, while in Hungary Magyars would do the same. The *Ausgleich* appeased the Hungarians, but also made it difficult to co-ordinate security policy because each half of the empire had its own government, parliament and budget. Not only were resources scarce, but, as was the case with Germany's fiscal problems, *translating* resources into armed strength proved difficult. The size and quality of the army suffered – in 1866 it was one of the largest armies, by 1914 it was one of the smallest – while challenges to security and internal cohesion multiplied. The decline of the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans, the rise of Balkan nationalism – including Serbia's drive to unite the Slavs – and the breakdown of relations with Serbia's Slavic patron, Russia, over what should replace the Ottoman order in the Balkans, all generated an unfavourable balance between capabilities and vulnerabilities with far-reaching consequences.

self-determination

The idea that each national group has the right to establish its own national state. It is most often associated with the tenets of Wilsonian internationalism and became a key driving force in the struggle to end imperialism.

Further complicating the problem of measuring power is that intangible elements, such as the quality of political and military leadership and diplomatic skill, also count. In the negotiations leading to the renewal of the 1905 Anglo-Japanese Alliance, for instance, the outcome was determined not by raw power, but by diplomatic skill. The Japanese not only dodged a commitment to send troops to fight with the British army against Russia in India, but they secured in 1907 a British commitment to ship Japanese troops to Manchuria in the event of war with Russia. To put the problem another way, power is not an *object* – something one possesses – but a *relationship*. It might be helpful to think about power in the abstract: A exercises power over B when A gets B to do something it would *not* otherwise do. The Japanese influenced the British to accommodate their needs. Austria-Hungary increasingly found it lacked both the levers to compel its troublesome nationalities to live happily under the Habsburg Monarchy and the military means to deter Serbia, Russia, Romania, Greece and Italy from exploiting that weakness. Accordingly, whether A imposes its will by force or persuasion, the pull of an idea or even through deceit, does not matter. All represent the exercise of power. Another example might be useful here. In 1904, France and Britain concluded an *Entente* (flexible agreement), settling their long-standing overseas rivalry. After 1905, when Germany appeared more threatening, the two Powers also co-ordinated military plans. Although the *Entente* and the military talks did not commit Britain to go to war in 1914 alongside France in the way a formal alliance certainly would have, the connection (or even the sense of obligation) made itself felt in London. As Sir Edward Grey, the British foreign secretary, wrote: ‘The Entente and still more the constant and emphatic demonstrations of affection . . . have created in France a belief that we shall support them. . . . If this expectation is disappointed, the French will never forgive us.’ Britain made its decision in 1914 on strategic grounds, but the moral pull of the *Entente* did have a real impact.

Another reason why it is misleading to focus exclusively on the hard components of power is that the instruments of power in one political, geographical or strategic *context* do not necessarily work in another. The Boer War (1899–1902) provides a telling example. Britain, the world’s greatest seapower, with overwhelming military, financial and industrial resources at its disposal, found itself humiliated when two tiny and backward Afrikaner republics resisted British annexation. Two years of brutal and bitter guerrilla warfare exacted a disproportionate toll on the British, who finally achieved their victory in 1902. Battleships, factories, manpower and money, the assets of a global giant, deterred the other Great Powers from directly assisting the Boers, but could not be *converted* into a swift victory over a small yet determined guerrilla army in southern Africa. Nevertheless, this ability to resist did not make the Boers more powerful than the British even for a short time. The Boer War (like the American war in Vietnam decades later) only underscored the limits of the instruments of power when moved from one context to another. Depending on the international situation, Britain’s overseas empire, the source of British prestige and strength, could also be a source of weakness. For much of the nineteenth century, British maritime supremacy made the empire invulnerable, but by the turn of the century the upsurge in overseas expansion and naval building, combined with Britain’s lack of European

allies, left parts of the empire vulnerable to encroachments, especially by France and Russia. Britain's alliance with Japan and the *ententes* with France and Russia were thus a political response to an increasingly threatening global environment.

Naturally, what preoccupied statesmen most of all was how to exercise power in the European states system. Since there was no common sovereignty – that is, one great monarch or one coercive government to decide things – states had to influence the behaviour of other states. In this anarchy of states, war (state-led violence for political purposes) was the ultimate means by which states imposed their will or defended their independence, but war among the Great Powers had never been constant. Indeed, one scholar called the states system the 'anarchical society' because war and the pursuit of order through co-operation have both been constant facts of international life. The cost of general war forced statesmen to turn to methods of achieving political goals through consensus building and mutual security rather than war. This was, for instance, the chief consequence of the Napoleonic Wars. Tactically superior and zealously patriotic revolutionary armies had marched from one decisive victory to another to install French imperialism and Napoleon as Europe's common sovereign. Lessons were learned. A letter from the British prime minister to the Russian tsar in 1805 captures the essence of the consensus or system-building drive that Bonapartist ambitions had inspired. The wartime allies, he wrote, should found the peace on 'a general Agreement and Guarantee for the mutual protection and security of different Powers, and for re-establishing a General system of Public Law in Europe'. What emerged after 1815 was a system of collective Great Power supremacy and security designed to contain international violence and to prevent another hegemonic threat – the so-called **Concert of Europe**.

To understand why this Concert broke down in the twentieth century requires an insight into why it worked in the first place, and continued to do so despite the 1848 revolutions and mid-century wars. Historians disagree, but the typical answer is that after Napoleon's defeat the balance of power was restored. The balance metaphor suggests a self-adjusting alliance mechanism: when any one state gains inordinate power and drives towards supremacy, the others close ranks to form a blocking coalition, thus restoring the equilibrium. According to this view, the wars of 1914–45 can be explained as two failed bids by Germany to impose its mastery over Europe. To be sure, the web of roughly counteracting military capabilities helped to check national ambitions, but the balance of power should be viewed not solely as a system of mutual military deterrence, but also as one of co-operation. The Vienna settlement was founded on a series of interlocking treaties binding the Great Powers into a co-operative balance, expressed in a set of rules or customary law, designed to safeguard Great Power rights (security and independence) and to regulate changes in the European order. Co-operation made for containment. The makers of the Vienna settlement had not lost sight of the fact that France still possessed the raw resources to play a fundamental role. French *participation* in the inner circle after 1818 signalled its place among the Great Powers. Inclusion carried with it rights and responsibilities: the right to participate in the management of the system and the responsibility to manage it well. Although later governments voiced pretensions of Napoleonic

Concert of Europe

The nineteenth-century European system of regulation of international affairs by the Great Powers. Although much of the historical literature argues that the system was successful in keeping the general peace of Europe because it was based on a 'balance of power', more recent work has stressed the importance of shared rules of conduct, values, goals and diplomatic practices in relations between the Great Powers.

grandeur, France, like the other Powers, became contained within and, for the most part, *content* with the European balance.

Despite mid-century setbacks, the system lasted because it satisfied the vital interests of the only states with the potential capacity to upset it – the Great Powers. The treaties in the main were upheld, and the Powers co-operated among themselves to make adjustments and distribute compensation at ad hoc conferences or congresses. Crucially, states did not view their own security as requiring the *elimination* of another Great Power or the end of the balance as a whole. Moderate aims were pursued with a willingness to work with others to achieve them. Statesmen understood that overly ambitious goals at the expense of the other Great Powers or of the status quo would be regarded as a breach of the ‘Public Law in Europe’ and thus might provoke a self-defeating backlash. Yet the rules were not followed because of mutual deterrence alone. Adherence brought concrete and lasting benefits: security, status and control.

Otto von Bismarck’s policy of a rapid revolution in the international status quo followed by renewed co-operation illustrates this point. German unification was completed by cunning diplomacy and Prussian military efficiency in wars against Austria in 1866 and France in 1870. Rather than allow the upheaval caused by these wars to destroy the Concert, the German chancellor took the lead after 1871 in rebuilding co-operation in order to safeguard the newly unified Germany. At the Congress of Berlin in 1878, the Great Powers compelled Russia to moderate its excessive claims against the Turks after the 1877 Russo-Turkish war. At the Berlin conference of 1884–85, rules designed to isolate Europe from Great Power rivalry over the partition of Africa were agreed. Thus while much changed after 1815, Concert diplomacy remained ‘a habit of mind’ and statesmen and diplomats continued to pursue their national interests and short-term gains without deliberately jeopardizing *long-range* stability. These generalizations, admittedly more true of 1815–48 than 1871–1900, require qualification and explanation beyond the space available. What should be stressed is that the international system (and peace) endured because the Great Powers had far more to gain by upholding it than by destroying it.

Broadly, what had changed by 1900? The rapid pace of modernization after 1870 is most striking. Modernization flowed as a consequence of the scientific, French and industrial revolutions, characterized by rationalization, secularization, urbanization and industrialization. Political, social and economic life moved from the control of a narrow elite to become subject to wider influences; the movement of people from rural areas to large urban, industrial communities structured along class lines promoted a rise in population; and mechanized production displaced the primacy of agriculture. One estimate that exemplifies this change holds that the value of international trade over the period from 1800 to 1913 may have risen from one-thirtieth to one-third of world production. Modernization wore away old institutions and the fabric of traditional social, cultural and economic life. At the political level, publics began to exert influence through parliaments, political parties, pressure groups and the press. Elites everywhere struggled to moderate calls for changes at home, and the most outspoken groups called for expansion abroad. This political tension must be set against the background of a

much wider intellectual revolt: Nietzsche declared God dead, Darwin proved Genesis a myth, Freud unearthed the subconscious and Einstein swept away traditional thinking about time and space. Uncertainty, disorientation and the myth of a decaying civilization rushing towards disaster also expressed itself in the arts. Technology at the same time inflated the destructiveness and speed of modern warfare. Mass armies could be transported by rail to deliver knockout blows. Mobilization required general staffs and detailed plans. War plans and the arms race altered the character of foreign policy: the instinct or habit for cooperation and moderation gave way to fear and excess. In the minds of statesmen, dark images of the future military balance mixed with unease about whether the states system would continue to grant safety, status, influence and, indeed, even survival, to all the Great Powers for much longer.

However, caution is required when applying terms such as modernization. Its impact should not be exaggerated. After all, in 1900 two-thirds of Europe's inhabitants were still peasants. Old practices and methods always co-existed alongside emerging modern ones. Armies mobilized by railway but marched to move beyond the railhead and used horses to draw artillery and supplies. Modernization was uneven: north-west Europe modernized faster than the south and east. Some considered it a liberating and progressive force, while others despaired at the loss of traditional cultural and social practices. Most important of all, the term 'modernization' is only the historian's shorthand for a complex process of change, not an independent force in history.

Moreover, the relationship between modernization and international relations is ambiguous. At the turn of the century, many believed that it worked to inhibit Great Power conflicts. Ivan Bloch wrote in *War in the Future* (1898) that the destructiveness of modern weapons made their use pointless, while Norman Angell argued in *The Great Illusion* (1910) that the ever-closer integration of advanced trading economies rendered war futile. In the same year that Bloch's book appeared, diplomats gathered for the first Hague Peace Conference to consider disarmament and to promote the judicial arbitration of international disputes. In 1907, the second Hague Conference drafted rules to limit the horrors of modern warfare. Seven years later, war came. In retrospect, modernization explains the scale, intensity and cost of the fighting in 1914–18, but *not* why war broke out in the first place. To answer that question, we need to turn to the factor of causation.

The long-term causes of the First World War

The study of international history is dominated by controversies surrounding the causes of great wars. Many explanations have been offered. Some assert that great wars arise from economic and imperial rivalry. Others hold that world wars coincide with inevitable shifts in the distribution of international power. Still others look to miscalculation, misperception, accident, fear or simply the lust for conquest. Whatever approach they may select, scholars often examine the interaction between two sets of causes: long-term causes (or conditions) which

made a war *probable* and the immediate causes and decisions which *triggered* a particular war at a particular moment. What follows is divided between a discussion of some long-term causes and then a look at how events moved to spark war in the summer of 1914.

One important condition was the system of Great Power alliances and alignments. Overly rigid alliances prevented the 'proper' functioning of the balance of power, so the usual argument goes, and ensured that what might have been an isolated crisis in the Balkans became a general war. Certainly, from 1900 onwards, Europe was increasingly split into two coalitions: Germany and Austria-Hungary (the Central Powers) were bound by the 1879 Dual Alliance to support each other 'with the whole strength of their empires' if Russia attacked, and Italy joined in 1882 to form the Triple Alliance; France and Russia closed ranks in 1891–94 to counter the German–Austrian alliance, and Britain settled its imperial disputes with France in 1904 and with Russia in 1907. However, it is easy to exaggerate the point, for these alliances remained flexible enough to permit the Powers to withhold diplomatic and military support in order to exert a *restraining* influence on a partner, especially, as was so often the case, if no common interests were at stake. Britain remained the least committed. Italy remained neutral in 1914 and went to war on the side of the *Entente* Powers in 1915. Up until 1912–13, Berlin withheld its support for Austria in the Balkans and advised caution.

The real importance of the alliance system was the way in which the alliances and alignments were transformed into something very different from what their makers had intended. Bismarck's Dual Alliance was intended to stabilize the European status quo. It handed him a lever over Austrian policy, especially vis-à-vis the South Slavs. In 1887 he persuaded Russia to sign a 'Reinsurance Treaty' with Germany in order to prevent a hostile Franco-Russian combination emerging. Italy was likewise drawn in so as to prevent it from aligning with France. Bismarck's successors failed to renew the Russian treaty in 1890, but the resulting Franco-Russian alliance of 1894 was one of *restraint* rather than *aggression*: St Petersburg would not back a French war to recover the provinces lost to Germany in 1871 (Alsace and Lorraine), and Paris would not support Russia in Central or East Asia against Britain. The alliance did give Russia more freedom of action in the Balkans, but from 1897 to 1908 St Petersburg and Vienna agreed not to challenge each other's interests in the region. However, the original stabilizing character of these alliances eroded. The turning point came in 1904–05: Britain settled its overseas quarrels with France and Russia by concluding *ententes*, while Germany became increasingly isolated. From 1905 onwards, Great Power statesmen found that they could no longer afford the risk of restraining allies for fear of *undermining* alliances – as the Great Powers increasingly looked to violent solutions to security problems, allies became more important.

Germany's fear of isolation was only partly responsible for this transformation. With the 1904 *Entente Cordiale*, Paris dropped its claims on Egypt, and London offered support to the plans of the French foreign minister, Théophile Delcassé, to extend French domination in Morocco. Twice – in 1905 and again in 1911 (the Agadir crisis) – clumsy German efforts to frustrate French ambitions and divide

Entente Cordiale

A phrase coined to describe the Anglo-French rapprochement that took place in 1904. Subsequently used as a shorthand for the Anglo-French relationship in the twentieth century.

the British from the French pulled the *Entente* tighter. Equally, if not more important, than the clumsy German diplomacy over Morocco was the retreat of the Ottoman Empire from 1908 onwards. Russia saw Ottoman decline as an opportunity to assert its traditional role as protector of the Balkan Slavs in order to secure more influence over the Black Sea Straits and Constantinople, while Austria-Hungary feared that the consequence of Ottoman decline and Serb expansion would be the dissolution of its own multinational empire. Moreover, German statesmen could not afford to lose their principal ally, and therefore Austria's Balkan problem became Germany's as well. Similarly, since the Russian alliance was central to French security and hopes of regaining Alsace-Lorraine, France had little choice but to close ranks with Russia.

The transformation of the alliances after 1905 is also connected to another important condition leading to war in 1914: the arms race. These words usually conjure up an image of the tit-for-tat battleship building of the Anglo-German rivalry. Indeed, the rise of 'military-industrial complexes', and the stirring up of popular agitation for more warships, exemplifies much about the military buildup generally. The German challenge was the brainchild of Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz, who became state secretary for the navy in 1897. Tirpitz's plan revolved around building a 'risk fleet'. This was one so large that even if the British attacked and won, German ships would inflict enough damage to leave Britain and its empire vulnerable to the other Powers. By threatening London with a 'risk fleet', so Tirpitz believed, German statesmen could force the British into an alliance or at least compel them to cut a favourable deal on overseas issues. The German Naval Laws of 1898 and 1900 authorized ship construction at a rate that would over twenty years reach the required 2:3 ratio. But Tirpitz's thinking was flawed, for it assumed that Britain would do nothing to frustrate his plan. However, the British simply out-spent and out-built the Germans. In 1905–06, the First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir John Fisher, introduced the first all-big-gun battleship, the *Dreadnought*, and another faster class of all-big-gun vessel, the battle-cruiser. These technical innovations forced the Germans to reply in kind. In 1908 Tirpitz increased the rate of expansion with another Naval Law, but the British, determined to keep ahead at every stage, replied in 1909 by laying down twice as many dreadnoughts. By 1912, it was clear that Tirpitz had failed, and London and Berlin began to search for agreement. Although not a direct cause of the war, the normal arms race, along with the Moroccan crises, helped to turn British political opinion against Germany and led Britain to consider whether it ought to land an army on the continent to assist France in the event of war.

The developing arms race on the continent between the Franco-Russian and German–Austrian blocs was much more significant. The reasons for this are more political than technological. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, weapons innovations – quick-firing artillery, machine-guns and repeating rifles – were the cutting edge of the 'new imperialism' abroad. In Europe, the first decade of the new century saw slow change as armies integrated these new weapons into their existing force structures. German spending focused on naval rather than land armaments. More crucially, Russia's military and political collapse in 1904–05 left Germany in a position to overawe France, and Austria-Hungary relatively secure

in the Balkans. After the 1908–09 crisis in the Balkans, with substantial financial assistance from France, Russia's remarkable economic recovery upset the military equilibrium. Not only did spending on arms increase, but also steps were taken to restructure the army radically and to improve the rail network for faster and more efficient mobilization. St Petersburg did not launch these initiatives in order to menace Berlin and Vienna, but in both capitals the image of a more powerful Russia generated unease.

In 1912–13, war in the Balkans accelerated the arms race. A complex action–reaction cycle of arms programmes set in. In Germany, naval spending was cut. The Army Law of May 1913 increased the army's peacetime strength (515,000 to 544,000) and more artillery and machine-gun units were raised. The Austrians followed suit, but the growing threat from Serbia meant that a large proportion of the army would be pointed southwards, limiting Vienna's capacity to assist Germany against Russia. Indeed, the Germans put forward the 1913 Army Law to make up for the weakness of Austria-Hungary and the ground lost to the Franco-Russian bloc. Foreign observers saw something different. They concluded that the German increase in peacetime army strength was designed to enhance German striking power. News of the German buildup paved the way for a French reply. In August 1913, the French National Assembly extended compulsory military service from two to three years (initiating a change from 545,000 to 690,000 men) and authorized more arms spending. The following year, the French (who needed Russia to mobilize faster in order to threaten Germany with ready forces on two fronts) offered a 2,500 million franc loan to St Petersburg to build 5,000 kilometres of strategic railways by 1918. Russia's 1.5 billion rouble 'Great Programme' of 1913, which Tsar Nicholas II regarded as a necessary step to prepare for the 'unavoidable' war with Germany and Austria-Hungary, was the most striking measure. By 1918, the peacetime strength of the army was to be increased to 800,000 and armed with impressive quantities of artillery and machine-guns. Worse still for Berlin, the Russians did not feel any financial strain. Paradoxically, Germany – an economic powerhouse – was in danger of being out-spent. The problem was political rather than economic, for it was due to the fact that the German leadership found it nearly impossible to persuade the **Reichstag** to raise sufficient revenue. The implication for Berlin and Vienna was clear: the Central Powers could not win an arms race against the Franco-Russian bloc.

The destabilizing influence of the continental race and the general trend towards violent solutions to security problems become apparent when placed in the context of war plans. Before 1910, all general staffs drew up war plans, but only Germany, with the notorious **Schlieffen Plan**, intended to go on the offensive at the outbreak of war. After 1910, France, Russia and Austria all considered attack to be the best form of defence: the Austrians planned to smash Serbia; the French to launch an offensive into the lost provinces of Alsace-Lorraine and the Russians likewise into East Prussia. Historians have concluded that this pre-1914 'cult of the offensive' was based on the apparent lessons of Bismarck's wars of unification, when, exploiting the potential of railways and telegraphs to mobilize a large conscript army swiftly, the Prussian general staff had executed a series of crushing

Reichstag

The lower house of the German parliament during the Wilhelmine and Weimar periods.

Schlieffen Plan

The German pre-1914 plan for a pre-emptive military offensive against France, which would involve troops passing through neutral Belgium. It is named after the German army chief of staff, General Alfred von Schlieffen.

blows against Austria and France. Stunned by this exercise in military-political finesse, all Powers soon followed the Prussian example by adopting conscription and setting up planning staffs. By doing so, they ensured that the earlier Prussian successes could not be repeated. Moreover, as the industrial killing of 1914–18 would show, the development of magazine-feed rifles, quick-firing artillery, the machine-gun and barbed wire now handed the advantage from the attacker to the defender. Few saw this change coming. Before the war, most informed observers believed that armies could obtain quick victory and decisive outcomes. This ‘short war illusion’ bred aggressive foreign policies, brinkmanship and a sense of premonition at all levels – war was coming and the sooner the better.

Even if the trend towards offensive plans was a general one, the influence of the Schlieffen Plan remains fundamental to understanding how war came. The plan, inspired by Alfred von Schlieffen, the chief of the German general staff from 1891 to 1906, and adopted by his successor, General Helmuth von Moltke, provided Germany with a military solution to the problem of war on two fronts. The main body of the army would plunge through neutral Belgium to deliver a series of blows against the French, while Germany’s eastern frontier remained on the defensive to meet the more slowly mobilizing Russians: with France defeated, the combined German and Austro-Hungarian forces would then concentrate in the east to deal with Russia. Success depended on two premises: a healthy military superiority over France and Russia mobilizing slowly. The development of the inter-bloc arms race undermined these two premises. The Russian economic and military recovery and the diversion of Austrian forces to the Balkans meant it was very risky to leave the eastern frontier exposed. Improvements to the French and Belgian armies called into question the feasibility of a western knockout blow. By 1913–14, the combination of the French Three-Year Law, the Russian Great Programme and the Franco-Russian railway agreement cast a shadow over the German war plan. Moltke modified it to account for greater resistance in the west and faster Russian mobilization. Nonetheless, the long-term trend was clear: the German–Austrian bloc would lose the continental arms race and the Schlieffen Plan would be rendered unworkable in a matter of three years. In 1914, this approaching military inferiority generated a powerful incentive in the minds of German decision-makers to strike pre-emptively.

The Schlieffen Plan therefore strengthens the case for historians who wish to place the burden of responsibility for war on Berlin. They also add to this case the consequences of Germany’s world policy (*Weltpolitik*). There is some substance here. *Weltpolitik* raised suspicion and hostility abroad: what Germany saw as ‘encirclement’ by the *Entente* Powers was in reality partly of its own making. *Weltpolitik* emerged in the 1890s as a result of Germany’s deep unease about its future place among the Powers. Before *Weltpolitik*, Bismarck had rejected colonies on the grounds that German interests lay in upholding the European status quo. The men who replaced him, especially the new emperor, Wilhelm II, feared that Germany would sink into second-class status unless it acquired a great overseas empire like Britain. Enthusiasm for overseas expansion fed that for naval building. The emperor, convinced by the equation that navies equal empires – he had read Mahan’s celebrated *The Influence of Seapower on History* (1890) – embraced



Plate 1.1 Kaiser Wilhelm II and his chief military, naval and political advisers, 1910. (Photo: General Photographic Agency/Getty Images)

Tirpitz's 'risk fleet' strategy: to acquire an empire, Germany had to compel Britain to conciliate or give way. Imperialism through naval coercion failed spectacularly. Germany's gains in south-west Africa and the Pacific were small and economically burdensome. The German leadership had defined the goals of *Weltpolitik* only vaguely and pursued them in an erratic way. Historians put this down to the volatile personality of Wilhelm II and the ineptitude of his ministers. In reality, Germany simply could not make real advances abroad without plunging the whole European states system into conflict – in other words, not without jeopardizing German security.

Certainly, once war had broken out in Europe for reasons *other* than *Weltpolitik*, the pent-up aspirations for world power would come to the surface in German war aims – but only *after* the European states system had collapsed. If Berlin had really been bent on world power at all costs, then 1905 – when Russia was reeling from humiliation in Asia and Germany had military superiority over France – was the year to act. This course of action, proposed by Schlieffen in May that year, was rejected by Wilhelm II. To be sure, there are good reasons for focusing on Berlin, but this can be misleading. *Weltpolitik* was an expression of a much wider trend: 'to remain a great nation or to become one,' as one French statesmen put it, 'you must colonize.' France, Britain and Russia had been the winners of nineteenth-century expansion; Germany and Italy were latecomers scrambling to catch up. Indeed, the only link between imperialist rivalries and the coming of war can be found in the way in which the Europeans greeted the decline of the Ottoman Empire as an opportunity to be exploited rather than as a threat to Balkan, and therefore European, stability. More broadly, the significance of European imperialism before 1914 lies in the way in which the neo-Darwinian impulses which drove

the scramble for colonial expansion poisoned the European states system with the same struggle-or-die logic of excessive competition and inevitable war.

The same line can be taken with the view that German foreign policy was determined by domestic politics. This school sees *Weltpolitik* as manipulation. It was a cause around which Wilhelm II and his advisers hoped to rally the middle and industrial working classes behind the autocracy. Confronted by steadily rising socialism – the Social Democratic Party had won a landslide victory in the 1912 elections – German conservatives sought war in 1914 to stave off domestic political change. Once again, there is some substance here. In 1898, Chancellor Bülow justified *Weltpolitik* in these terms: ‘We must unswervingly wrestle the souls of our workers; [we] must try to regain the sympathies of the Social Democrat workers for the state and the monarchy.’ Nonetheless, while domestic politics may help to explain *Weltpolitik*, historians now agree that domestic factors did *not* play a crucial role in 1914. Moreover, comparative history shows that the German situation was not unique. On the eve of war, all the Powers had to cope with internal pressures and relate them to external circumstances. Austria-Hungary is the most telling case: aggressive action against Serbia, it was thought, would arrest the nationalist forces pulling the empire apart. In Russia, military defeat at the hands of the Japanese in 1904–05 had resulted in revolution and concessions to the Duma (parliament). Nicholas II and his advisers were therefore apprehensive, fearing that another humiliation abroad, especially in the Balkans, might shatter the tsarist regime, while a great victory in support of the South Slavs might strengthen it. France and Britain, the two liberal parliamentary Powers, also were not immune to political turmoil and industrial unrest. In 1914, the British prime minister, H.H. Asquith, feared civil war in Ireland over Home Rule more than a European conflict. Generally speaking, across Europe, the Powers had to contend with the social and political challenges arising from modernization. The most that can be concluded from this is that internal factors played a background role in 1914.

From one crisis to the next, 1905–13

Making judgements about the connection between long-term causes, which made war *probable*, and the immediate events and decisions, which *triggered* war, presents historians with complex problems. Some maintain that the broad factors determined events. ‘Things have got out of control’, wrote the German chancellor in July 1914, ‘and the stone has begun to roll.’ Recent scholarship, however, tends to reject theories of inadvertent war or ‘war by timetable’. Statesmen in fact understood the potentially cataclysmic consequences of their decisions. In 1914 they deliberately cast aside the habits of nineteenth-century diplomacy. In particular, faith in the European Concert eroded over the period 1905–14. It is in this process of erosion that the connection between conditions and triggers is made. The breakdown of peace, as David Stevenson has argued, must be seen as a ‘cumulative’ process, in which the Great Powers steadily rejected co-operation and

moderation in the pursuit of national interests and turned towards armed diplomacy and violent solutions to their security problems.

In examining the period from 1905 to 1914, one must focus on how the Great Powers responded diplomatically and militarily, and what consequences flowed from one crisis to the next. Significantly, the Moroccan crisis of 1905–06 was the first *militarized* confrontation between the Powers since the 1880s. Britain, Belgium and France made defensive preparations – the French reinforced units, trained reservists and procured arms – to signal their determination. Germany only took similar limited steps late in the crisis. Despite these moves, neither side desired war. The French knew that they were weak and did not wish to provoke the Germans, and Delcassé, the foreign minister, who alone advocated firmness, was forced to resign from the cabinet. Bülow, the German chancellor, alive to the danger of escalation, had no intention of risking a European war over African concessions. Accordingly, the Powers turned to conference diplomacy at Algeciras in January 1906 to end the dispute. At Algeciras, close Anglo-French collaboration forced Berlin to accept a diplomatic defeat. This not only confirmed Berlin's isolation – only Austria-Hungary offered support – but more importantly France and Britain strengthened the *Entente* with secret military staff talks.

In the next three crises – Bosnia in 1908–09, Morocco in 1911 and the Balkans in 1912–13 – the destabilizing trend of armed diplomacy continued. The first resulted from an attempt by the new government in Turkey, led by a group of officers known as the **Young Turks**, to assert sovereignty over the province of Bosnia-Herzegovina. At the Congress of Berlin in 1878, the Great Powers had agreed that the province should *formally* remain part of the Ottoman Empire but that Austria-Hungary should occupy and administer it. Vienna therefore reacted to the assertive policies of the Young Turks by annexing the province. The Austrian foreign minister, Alois Leza von Aehrenthal, hoped that this could be done peacefully. To his surprise, Serbia and Montenegro mobilized to object to the annexation of fellow Slavs among Bosnia's population, forcing the Austrians to mobilize in their turn. The Russians proposed a Great Power conference to deal with the annexation. After all Austria had *challenged* the authority of the European Concert by unilaterally overturning the decisions of the Congress of Berlin. However, armed diplomacy won the day. Germany stood beside Austria with a veiled threat of force. Of course, Bülow knew that the threat could be made safely. The Russians were too weak to intervene and made this clear. Russia and Serbia gave way. The crisis ended peacefully but not without serious consequences. Armed diplomacy had worked. The machinery of Great Power management had been sidelined. Accordingly, once it had the benefit of its military reforms in place, Russia resolved to show firmness next time. Meanwhile, in Berlin, it was clear that without support Austria-Hungary could not hold its position in the Balkans for long.

The second Moroccan crisis outwardly followed the pattern of the first. France moved to consolidate its claims in North Africa and Germany challenged it by sending the gunboat *Panther* to Morocco. In fact, the crisis took the inter-bloc confrontation a stage further, partly owing to blundering German diplomacy. Although France had acted in violation of the Algeciras agreement, Germany

Young Turks

Name given to a group of young army officers who in 1908 pushed the Ottoman Empire towards reformist policies and a more overtly Turkish nationalist stance.

failed to communicate its limited goals. At one point, the German foreign minister claimed the entire French Congo in compensation for its control of Morocco. As a result, the *Entente* Powers closed ranks. Unlike in 1905–06, however, the two alliance blocs were now more evenly matched in armaments, and the *Entente* took yet more extensive, though still defensive, military measures in a display of determination. London, alarmed that it had lost track of the German fleet for a time, brought the Royal Navy to a high state of alert. German restraint again made for a peaceful outcome: the Germans avoided provocative military moves and accepted an unfavourable compromise. The legacy of the crisis was more important than the outcome. Germany, now perceived to be the chief antagonist by officials in London, was once again isolated by *Entente* firmness. Another victory for armed diplomacy reinforced the trend to security through military strength. Faced with what they perceived to be *Entente* ‘encirclement’, German decision-makers were now determined to swing the military balance back in Germany’s favour.

The next stage in the breakdown of peace contributed greatly to the atmosphere of near-permanent crisis. The Franco-Russian response to the 1913 German Army Law convinced German decision-makers that they could not win the arms race. As the Bosnian crisis had shown, Austria-Hungary – Germany’s principal ally – needed Germany in a contest with Russia. Since 1897, co-operation between Vienna and St Petersburg had helped to keep the Balkans ‘on ice’. After 1909, the Russians were no longer content to do so. Confident in the French alliance and its own growing strength, Russia helped to form a league of Balkan states (Serbia, Bulgaria, Montenegro and Greece) to promote its interests when the time was right. However, much to St Petersburg’s chagrin, the small Powers took the initiative. In the winter of 1912–13, with the Ottoman Empire still reeling from Italy’s successful attack in 1911, the Balkan League went on the offensive and succeeded in driving the Turks back to the Bosphorus in the First Balkan War of October 1912 to May 1913. The defeat of one of the region’s two multinational empires placed a question mark beside the viability of the other. The Balkan League partners later fought among themselves over the spoils in the Second Balkan War of June–July 1913, and Serbia made additional territorial gains and drove westward to the Adriatic Sea. Austria-Hungary in reply increased its troop strength and demanded a halt to Serbian expansion. Germany promised support. Russia backed the Serbs. Britain announced that it would assist France. And France backed Russia. In the end, though, the Great Powers steered away from war. The ambassadors of the Great Powers met in London and hammered out a joint solution. Outwardly, the Concert had worked successfully once again.

However, the formalities of Great Power co-operation did not add up to much when set against the consequences of the Balkan wars. The crisis in the Balkans had sparked unprecedented levels of militarization and, moreover, tipped the strategic balance against Germany and Austria-Hungary, for Vienna’s south-eastern enemies were now becoming more powerful just as Russia entered the game of armed diplomacy. In contrast to 1909, when the Russians had been forced to acquiesce, they had now flexed their muscles with a display of menacing military activity. Britain and France had also prepared for war. Germany had neither pressed

Austria to back down, nor taken threatening measures. His behaviour would change in 1914, but during this crisis Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, the German chancellor, had resisted pressure from his soldiers to act. Indeed, when Serbia had defied Vienna's warnings against the capture of an outlet to the Adriatic, and in response to Britain's warning about a German attack on France, the German military leadership had assembled in the absence of the chancellor for the so-called 'War Council' of 8 December 1912. Wilhelm had favoured an Austrian war with Serbia. Moltke had agreed and pointed out that a European war was inevitable and 'the sooner the better'. The German historian Fritz Fischer has portrayed the meeting as a German decision to delay aggression until 1914. The judgement of one participant is closer to the mark: the result was 'pretty much nil'. As an indication of the changing mood in Berlin, though, Moltke's words tell us much. The mood in Vienna, now utterly disillusioned with the Great Power co-operation, was not much better. Furthermore, although the Conference of Ambassadors agreed to set up an Albanian state as a barrier to Serb expansion, Serbia had still doubled in size in two years and only complied with the London decisions when Vienna threatened force. In sum, this last gasp of the Concert and Great Power management succeeded only in containing the Balkan wars, not the general crisis in the states system. Viewed from Berlin and Vienna, the future no longer promised co-operation and moderation, but increasing isolation and inferiority. Instead of guaranteeing the security and independence of all the Great Powers, which had been the bedrock of nineteenth-century international stability, the system now appeared to be jeopardizing the survival of the Central Powers.

1914: decisions for war

The series of decisions leading to the outbreak of war in the summer of 1914 was triggered by the murders of the Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife in Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia, on 28 June 1914. To understand why, we must describe how another Balkan crisis became connected with the general crisis in the states system. Although the terrorists who carried out the murder had been aided by Serbian intelligence without the sanction of the Serbian prime minister, Belgrade's lack of direct responsibility counted for little in Vienna, for the assassinations provided the opportunity for the violent solution to the South Slav problem that Austro-Hungarian officials now craved. On 23 July Vienna issued an ultimatum. Serbia accepted all but one of the ultimatum's demands, but this did not make any difference to Austrian thinking. 'The Monarch must take an energetic decision to show its power of survival', the Hungarian premier remarked, 'and to put an end to intolerable conditions in the south-east.' Austria declared war on 28 July. The decision was a reckless leap into the dark since no one in Vienna could have overlooked that war with Serbia was war with Russia. The decision originated from desperation in the face of irreversible decline, but, in retrospect, there is every reason to conclude that Vienna would not have been so reckless had Berlin not issued the so-called 'blank cheque' in support of Austria's Balkan war.

The 'blank cheque' was issued by Bethmann Hollweg on 6 July. Many of the long-term causes of war set out above converge here. The European alliance system had solidified into two blocs. German efforts to break up the *Entente* had only resulted in further isolation. Austria-Hungary, Germany's principal ally, might abandon it or, worse, crumble without German backing. The Franco-Russian armaments programmes, combined with Russia's willingness to flex its muscles, meant that the Central Powers would come under the shadow of *Entente* power. It was against this background that in Berlin military and civilian opinion agreed on the 'blank cheque'. A limited war in the Balkans would crush Serbia, humiliate Russia and perhaps even break up the *Entente*, which was a gross misjudgement of the Russian commitment to Belgrade. The next step was an easy one. If a European war came as the result of a local one, so went the reasoning in Berlin, then this would be the time to fight. The barriers to running such a calculated risk had long since been worn away. At the prompting of Wilhelm II, Bethmann Hollweg made at the end of July a half-hearted attempt to restrain Austria. By this stage, Russia's military preparations had reached alarming proportions. Intelligence also reported French and Belgian war preparations. Time was running out for a successful execution of the Schlieffen Plan. Berlin issued warnings to St Petersburg and Paris and then ultimatums on 31 July, neither of which was accepted. The German war plan continued to move ahead.

The Austro-Serbian war confronted Nicholas II and his advisers with a stark choice on 24 July. As the Russian foreign minister, Sergei Sazonov, put it, if Russia did nothing except protest, then its influence in the Balkans would 'collapse utterly'. The alternative was to act. The lessons of 1908–09 and 1912–13 made pressure to do so immense. Diplomatic avenues would be explored, but mobilization preparations were planned for 26 July. Over the next four days, as the crisis escalated, decisions were taken to order first partial and then full mobilization. Russian mobilization cut across Berlin's calculation that the Austro-Serbian war could be localized and so triggered activation of the Schlieffen Plan. The warning from Berlin on 29 July had little impact in St Petersburg, where war was now thought to be unavoidable. Once again confidence in the French alliance and Russia's strength combined to propel Russia's leaders forward. By coincidence, the French president, Raymond Poincaré, and René Viviani, the prime minister, were on a return voyage by sea from a state visit to St Petersburg early in the crisis and, consequently, out of contact with Paris. Regardless, the French ambassador, Maurice Paléologue, spoke unequivocally: 'France would not only give Russia strong diplomatic support,' he told Sazonov, 'but would, if necessary, fulfil all the obligations imposed on her by the alliance.' Perhaps if France had advised restraint, Russia might not have acted alone. Yet such a course would have destroyed the cornerstone of French security – the Franco-Russian alliance.

Once the German plan went into operation on 1 August, war between four of the Great Powers was certain, and two now had to choose. Italy, financially weak, vulnerable to blockade and fearful of domination by a victorious German–Austro-Hungarian bloc, opted for neutrality first and then joined with the *Entente* Powers in 1915. Britain was less committed by treaty than Italy. Certainly Britain was a signatory to the 1839 Treaty of London that guaranteed Belgium's independence

– not to mention the *ententes* of 1904 and 1907. However, the *ententes* and the staff talks with the French did not add up to military alliances. The British cabinet had decided that any decision to help Belgium had to be ‘rather one of policy than legal obligation’. The Germans were optimistic and on 29 July Bethmann Hollweg offered the British a promise not to annex Belgian territory in exchange for neutrality. As late as 1 August the British had no plans to land an army in France; rather, the latest storm over Irish Home Rule preoccupied London.

German optimism proved to be wishful thinking. On 2 August, the cabinet resolved to defend the French coast and fleet and to protect Belgium against a ‘substantial’ violation of its neutrality. The German invasion of Belgium followed and Britain declared war on 4 August. Unquestionably the invasion tipped the scales in the cabinet. Safeguarding Belgium and Holland from the control of a hostile power had been a strategic interest for centuries. Equally important was the legacy of the Anglo-German naval antagonism. The German violation persuaded liberals who saw upholding the rights of small nations and the rule of law against aggressors as a moral duty. Germany was believed to be set on conquest of Napoleonic proportions. Britain’s own safety would be jeopardized if Germany won. Yet containing Germany was not Britain’s *only* strategic concern in 1914. What if Britain opted for neutrality and the Franco-Russian alliance won? The *ententes* had been intended to secure the British Empire from these two once hostile Powers, both well positioned to menace it. If they won, Russia and France would be dominant in Europe and in no way friendly to Britain, which had left them to face the Central Powers alone.

The triple stalemate

In the summer of 1914, the call to arms was greeted with widespread (though not universal) enthusiasm and relief. The international Left and pacifists were sidelined. Despite decades of hostility from the ruling elites, opposition parties united behind the national war efforts in a show of patriotic solidarity. Few grasped what kind of war it would be and still fewer could have foreseen its far-reaching consequences. The Schlieffen Plan, like the other pre-war plans, failed: the ‘short war illusion’ evaporated. Fronts stabilized, east and west. Barbed wire, artillery shells and machine-guns brought home the brutal realities of trench warfare.

Indeed, the First World War left deep scars in European life precisely because it became a full-scale four-year struggle between armies, economies and societies. Without it, the Bolshevik Revolution and the Second World War are unimaginable. This is why, having examined how war came, we also need to consider briefly why it lasted so long. The answers are connected. Each step towards 1914 and each step afterwards was an ‘incremental’ and ‘sequential’ one. As always, the interplay between what leaders chose to do and the circumstances in which they confronted each choice is key to understanding why a return to the pre-war status quo was impossible. Over time, options narrowed. Every new offensive plan or diplomatic initiative held out the promise of success. Not only did it become easier to lose

50,000 soldiers after losing the first 50,000, but the victory required to justify such sacrifice had to be all the more complete. Until 1917 a triple stalemate reigned: diplomatically, a compromise peace did not emerge; militarily, decisive breakthrough was unrealizable; and, on the home fronts, national solidarity held firm.

The incompatibility of war aims highlights why compromise proved to be impossible. Given the circumstances of its outbreak, none of the Powers entered the war with well-defined aims. As they developed afterwards, maximum war aims illustrated the degree to which the European Concert and moderation in the pursuit of security had disappeared. In September 1914 Bethmann Hollweg set out Germany's aim as 'security for the German Reich in west and east for all imaginable time'. This programme included the end of France as an independent Power and the erection of an economic sphere in Central Europe and Africa. However, Germany, like all the Powers, moderated its war aims in order to woo allies or to drive wedges into the opposing camp. All hoped to win over the Poles with promises of an independent state of some sort, and territorial pledges of large areas of Austrian territory were likewise extended by the *Entente* to Italy, Romania and Serbia. In Vienna, opinion swung towards eliminating Serbia altogether, unless a separate peace with Russia could be bought in exchange for a nominally independent Serbia. Apart from punishing German aggression, Britain wished to eliminate Germany as a naval and colonial rival, restore Belgium and expand overseas. France sought the return of Alsace-Lorraine and to cripple Germany for a generation by exacting indemnities and occupying the left bank of the Rhine. Russia supported France in the west and sought limited annexations in the east – including what was required for Poland and an independent Hanover. Russian officials also toyed with the idea of supporting greater autonomy for the Czechs, but on the whole the *Entente* Powers steered away from the breakup of Austria-Hungary in an effort to draw Vienna away from Berlin. Against the Ottomans, however, who had entered the war on the side of the Central Powers in October 1914, no such restraint operated: Russia looked to acquire the Black Sea Straits and Constantinople, while Britain prized the Persian Gulf region, Egypt and Palestine, and France likewise eyed Syria and Lebanon.

The drive towards annexations and war aims premised on stripping foes of their independence and security also helps to explain why, as we shall see in Chapter 2, no compromise peace emerged until December 1917, when the **Bolsheviks** signed an armistice. In the eight months before, Austria-Hungary and Russia, the faltering members of each coalition, explored the prospects for a compromise, but both initiatives fell flat for the same reasons: territorial issues and alliance cohesion. Britain and France could not break the secret pledge to Italy to support its territorial ambitions against Austria without jeopardizing not only Italian support, but also that of Serbia, Romania and possibly Russia. Vienna would not break with Berlin, nor did it have the power to moderate German war aims. After the abdication of Tsar Nicholas II in March 1917, moreover, both the provisional government and the revolutionary Petrograd Soviet, the two rival centres of political authority that succeeded the tsar, sent out peace feelers, but to find a general peace, not a separate one. Russia continued to adhere to the September 1914 Pact of London that committed the *Entente* Powers to refrain from separate peace talks. At the same

Bolsheviks

Originally in 1903 a faction led by Lenin within the Russian Social Democratic Party, over time the Bolsheviks became a separate party and led the October 1917 revolution in Russia. After this 'Bolsheviks' was used as a shorthand to refer to the Soviet government and communists in general.

time, Russia did not have the strength or single-mindedness to reshape Allied war aims to permit a compromise. Finally, unofficial contacts between France, Britain and Germany initiated by the Vatican peace note of August 1917 also came to nothing because both sides regarded their core war aims – Alsace-Lorraine and Belgium – as too important to abandon. Moreover, neither Britain nor France was willing to cut a deal with the Germans at the other's expense.

The diplomatic deadlock would not have mattered had one coalition managed to convert its strength into a decisive military victory, but the preponderance of defensive fire made such a breakthrough impossible. Tanks, motor transport and close-support aircraft, married with 'infiltration tactics', would restore mobility on the battlefield by 1939, but once the armies of 1914 marched away from the railheads, they became bogged down in trench warfare owing to the superiority of the defence. With offensive ideas running dry, the goal simply became, as General Ludendorff put it, to last 'ten minutes longer' than the enemy. The war thus resembled a titanic siege between mass armies, societies and economies. Which Great Power would give in or collapse first? Both sides hoped to manipulate neutrals and to recruit allies to tip the scales. Turkey and Bulgaria (October 1915) joined the Central Powers. The *Entente* assembled a global coalition of twenty-two states, including Japan and America. Britain and France struck at the Ottomans at Gallipoli and in the Middle East. The war expanded into Africa and Asia as well. The *Entente* blockaded the Central Powers, and the Germans launched a counter-blockade with U-boats. However, victory was to be found only in Europe, where the preponderance of men and fire counted. At the outbreak of war, the total French stockpile of artillery shells was five million. Two years later they were lobbing this many shells at the Germans per month. By 1918, the figure had reached ten million per month. Supplying these storms of steel and manning the trenches required an unprecedented level of state intervention in economic and social life. Large ministries responsible for the efficient management of munitions, fuel, labour, transport and food became crucial for survival. Twentieth-century total war had arrived.

If not militarily or diplomatically, the only other way in which the war could have come to an early end was by the domestic collapse of one of the Great Powers. What is striking, especially given pre-war fears about social revolution, is how resilient even the multinational empires of the east proved to be under the strain of total war. In both coalitions, the circumstances of 1914 permitted governments to present the war as a life-and-death struggle of defence in the face of unprovoked aggression. The domestic political truces of 1914 thus held firm, and the crises caused by 'shell shortages' pulled together strong alliances between business, labour and government. The capacity of governments to finance a protracted war by borrowing defied the pre-war assumption that wars would be short because no state could afford to fight them for very long. Overall, the internal political situation remained in favour of those committed to victory, and thus sustained the war. At the top, the real fear of the ruling elites was disappointing the high (even hyper) state of public expectations. Across Europe, therefore, successive civilian governments gave way to politicians or (in Germany) generals promising a decisive outcome – not peace at any price.

U-boat (English abbreviation of *Unterseeboot*)
A German submarine.

Conclusion

The triple stalemate explains why the war continued for fifty-two months, and why the decisions of July–August 1914 were so momentous in their consequences. The men of 1914 must bear a heavy burden of responsibility, even if they could not foresee what would flow from their individual decisions, and even if at times their choices appeared to be predestined. As we saw, the choices they made to cross over the long-established thresholds of Concert diplomacy were deliberate ones, calculated in the full knowledge that European civilization was on the brink. And so it was. In addition to the horrific loss of life and wealth, the struggle accelerated Europe's decline in world affairs, and initiated the changes that culminated in Europeans losing the capacity to shape their own affairs. As we shall see in Chapter 2, the turning point arrived in 1917, when pressure for peace became significant and cracks first began to show. The French armies mutinied and the tsarist regime fell apart. Though Austria-Hungary and Italy were also on the brink, it was the Bolshevik take-over that knocked Russia out of the war. Berlin could now seek victory in the west. The entry of the United States, however, in the short term probably rescued the *Entente* from bankruptcy, and in the long term turned the contest against the Central Powers. The advent of the Russian Revolution and America's entry into the fray also brought to the forefront men with fresh ideas on how to create lasting peace. These ideas would help shape the course of twentieth-century international relations.

Debating the origins of the First World War

The debate about the outbreak of the First World War is divided between those who place the burden of responsibility on Germany and those who locate German policy within a much broader explanation for the breakdown of international relations. Of the first viewpoint, the case put forward by Fritz Fischer of Hamburg University in *Germany's Aims in the First World War* (London, 1967) is the most important. Fischer argued that Germany was aggressively expansionist. Its ruling elite believed that conquest abroad would secure imperial Germany's autocratic political and social order at home. For Fischer, German decisions in 1914 were the culmination of a premeditated 'grab for world power' (*Griff nach der Weltmacht*). Adversaries of the Fischer thesis attacked the parallels he drew between Bethmann Hollweg in 1914 and Hitler in 1939. They questioned the primacy he attached to domestic factors. And, most of all, historians have recently illustrated how Germany's 'calculated risk' in 1914 sprang from a deteriorating position within a states system in crisis.

Recommended reading

The best general introductions to European history in the period covered by this chapter are Felix Gilbert and David C. Large, *The End of the European Era, 1890 to the Present*, 4th edn (New York, 1991), Christopher J. Bartlett, *The Global Conflict: The International Rivalry of the Great Powers, 1880–1990* (London, 1994), Norman Stone, *Europe Transformed, 1878–1919* (Oxford, 1999) and James Joll, *Europe since 1870*, 4th edn (London, 1990). Students without a background in the history of nineteenth-century diplomacy will find Christopher J. Bartlett, *Peace, War and the European Powers, 1814–1914* (Basingstoke, 1996) and F. R. Bridge and Roger Bullen, *The Great Powers and the European State System, 1815–1914*, second edition (London, 2004) indispensable.

On the subject of the Great Powers and the states system, Bartlett, Bridge and Bullen (cited above) and A. J. P. Taylor, *Struggle for the Mastery of Europe, 1848–1914* (Oxford, 1954) are superb texts. Matthew Anderson, *The Rise of Modern Diplomacy* (London, 1993) and Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (London, 1988) provide a broad perspective. Kennedy's thesis on the long-term patterns of Great Power ascendancy and decay has been criticized by David Reynolds, 'Power and Wealth in the Modern World', *Historical Journal* (1989), vol. 32, pp. 475–87, and Gordon Martel, 'The Meaning of Power: Rethinking the Decline and Fall of Great Britain', *International History Review* (1991), vol. 13, pp. 662–94.

For studies of international politics and the search for order, see F. H. Hinsley, *Power and the Pursuit of Peace* (Cambridge, 1963) and Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (London, 1977). On the nineteenth-century balance of power, see Paul W. Schroeder, 'Did the Vienna Settlement Rest on a Balance of Power?', *American Historical Review* (1992), vol. 97, pp. 683–706, and his 'The 19th-Century International System: Changes in Structure', *World Politics* (1986), vol. 39, pp. 1–26.

On the Venezuela Blockade and the Anglo-Japanese Alliance negotiations, see N. Mitchell, 'The Venezuela Blockade, 1902–3', *Diplomatic History* (1996), vol. 20, pp. 185–209, and Keith Wilson, 'The Anglo-Japanese Alliance of August 1905 and Defending India: A Case of the Worst Scenario', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* (1994), vol. 21, pp. 334–56.

For a survey of the breakdown of the nineteenth-century states system, see Richard Langhorne, *The Collapse of the Concert of Europe: International Politics, 1890–1914* (London, 1981). The best general introduction to the origins of the war is James Joll, *The Origins of the First World War*, 2nd edn (London, 1992). The essays in H. W. Koch, *The Origins of the First World War*, 2nd edn (London, 1984) and Richard Evans and Harmut Pogge von Strandmann, *The Coming of the First World War* (Oxford, 1988) are also excellent. On the Balkan wars, see Richard C. Hall, *The Balkan Wars 1912–13: Prelude to the First World War* (London, 2000). For two books which explore the intellectual and cultural background to 1914, see Daniel Pick, *War Machine: The Rationalisation of Slaughter in the Modern Age* (New Haven, CT, 1993) and Robert Wohl, *The Generation of 1914* (London, 1980).

On European alliances and alignments, see Paul W. Schroeder, 'Alliances, 1815–1945: Weapons of Power and Tools of Management', in K. Knorr, *Historical Problems of National Security* (Lawrence, KS, 1976). For background on the arms race and war plans, see Geoffrey Wawro, *Warfare and Society in Europe, 1792–1914* (London, 2000). David Stevenson has written the most detailed study in *Armaments and the Coming of War: Europe, 1904–1914* (Oxford, 1996). See also S. Van Evera, 'The Cult of the Offensive and the Origins of the First World War' and Jack Snyder, 'Civil–Military Relations and the Cult of the Offensive, 1914 and 1984', both in *International Security* (1984), vol. 9, pp. 58–146. For the argument that, despite its apparent wealth, Germany was losing the arms race because its federal political structure and taxation system prevented the necessary levels of defence spending, see Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War* (London, 1998), Chapters 4 and 5. On the European crises of 1905–14 and the militarization of diplomacy, see David Stevenson, 'Militarization and Diplomacy in Europe before 1914', *International Security* (1997), vol. 22, pp. 125–61.

David Stevenson has supplied the most cogent and up-to-date study of 1914 in *The Outbreak of the First World War: 1914 in Perspective* (London, 1997), including a survey of the debate in Chapter 5. For fascinating and detailed studies of individual capitals, see Keith Wilson's *Decisions for War, 1914* (London, 1995). Works critical of 'inadvertent war' are J. S. Levy, T. J. Christensen and M. Trachtenberg, 'Mobilisation and Inadvertence in the July Crisis', *International Security* (1991), vol. 16, pp. 189–203 and Marc Trachtenberg, 'The Coming of the First World War: A Reassessment', in his *History and Strategy* (Princeton, NJ, 1991).

For a revisionist account of the war's course, conduct and outcome, see Ferguson, *The Pity of War* and the first volume of Hew Strachan's *The First World War: To Arms* (Oxford, 2001). The account of why the war continued for as long as it did is based on David Stevenson, *The First World War and International Politics* (Oxford, 1991). The best single-volume treatment of the origins, conduct and consequences of the war is David Stevenson's *1914–18: The History of the First World War* (London, 2004) (published in the United States under the title *Cataclysm: The First World War as Political Tragedy*).