

abolition of social privilege, and whose party, the Social Democrats, had become by 1914 the largest in the *Reichstag*.

The possessing classes had their own quarrels, mainly between the landowners of the east and the industrialists of the west, but they made common cause against what they saw as a socialist revolutionary threat. From the beginning of the twentieth century they began to combat it by a 'forward policy' based on the assertion of 'national greatness'. With the Kaiser at their head, German right-wing political leaders began to claim for Germany the status, not only of a Great Power, but of a World Power, *Weltmacht*. The only competitor in that class was the British Empire; but if she was to compete with Britain Germany needed not only a great army, but a great fleet. To raise money for such a fleet a major propaganda exercise was necessary; and that propaganda could be effective only if Britain was depicted as the next great adversary that the Germans must overcome if they were to achieve the status that they believed to be rightfully their due.

The Rival Alliances

Germany already saw herself surrounded by enemies. When Bismarck created the German Empire in 1871, he knew very well that the natural reaction of her neighbours would be to unite against her, and he took care to see that this did not happen. France, with good reason, he regarded as irreconcilable, if only because she had been compelled to surrender her provinces of Alsace and Lorraine. He therefore tried to neutralize her by encouraging the colonial ambitions that would bring her into conflict with Britain, and ensured that she could find no allies among the other powers of Europe by binding them all into his own system of alliances. The Dual Monarchy presented no difficulty. Beset with internal problems, she had been happy to conclude the Dual Alliance with Germany in 1879. Her own natural enemy was the newly unified Italy, who coveted the Italian-speaking lands on the southern slopes of the Alps and at the head of the Adriatic that still remained in

Austrian hands; but Bismarck linked both into a Triple Alliance by supporting Italian territorial claims against France and her Mediterranean possessions.

There remained the two flanking powers, Russia and Britain. Russia would be a formidable ally for the French if given the chance, which Bismarck was determined that she should not have. He had been careful to cultivate her friendship and had linked her into his 'system' by an alliance concluded in 1881 and renewed, as a 'Reinsurance Treaty', six years later. As for Britain, France and Russia were her natural adversaries, so to have them held in check by a strong central power suited British statesmen very well. The one thing that Bismarck had good reason to fear was a war in the Balkans between Austria and Russia that might upset the balance that he had so precariously established. At the Congress of Berlin in 1878 he brokered an agreement that divided the Balkans into spheres of influence between Russia and the Dual Monarchy, and gave to the latter a 'Protectorate' over the most northerly and turbulent of the Ottoman provinces, Bosnia-Herzegovina. This settlement produced an uneasy peace that lasted until the end of the century, but Bismarck's 'system' had begun to unravel long before then.

Europe in 1914

Bismarck's successors, for a whole complex of reasons, failed to renew the treaty with Russia, thus leaving her available as an ally for France. It was a terrible mistake. For Russia, if this newly powerful Germany was not an ally she was a threat, and one that could be countered only by a military alliance with France. France was in any case a plentiful source of the investment capital that Russia needed to finance the modernization of her economy. So in 1891 the two powers concluded a treaty, the Dual Entente, to confront the Triple Alliance, and the rival groups began to compete in the enhancement of their military power.

The British initially regarded this alliance between her traditional adversaries with alarm, and the dynamics of international relations

would normally have dictated an alliance with Germany as a natural consequence. That this did not happen was due partly to the traditional British reluctance to become involved in any entangling continental alliances, and partly to extraordinarily clumsy German diplomacy. More important than either, however, was the German decision that we have already noted, to build a navy that could challenge the British command of the seas.

Given that she already had the most powerful army in the world, it was not immediately evident – at least not to the British – why Germany needed an ocean-going navy at all. Hitherto, in spite of industrial competition, British relations with Germany had been friendly rather than otherwise. But now there began a ‘naval race’, for quantitative and qualitative superiority in ships, that was to transform British public opinion. By 1914 Britain had pulled decisively ahead, if only because she was prepared to devote greater resources to shipbuilding and did not need, as did the Germans, to sustain the burden of an arms race by land as well. But the British remained concerned not so much with the fleet that Germany had already built as with that which she yet might – especially if a successful war gave her military hegemony over the Continent.

So Britain mended her fences with her traditional rivals. In 1904 she settled her differences with France in Africa, establishing a relationship that became known as *l'entente cordiale*. There remained the Russian Empire, whose southward expansion towards the frontiers of India had given Victorian statesmen continual nightmares, and had led the British in 1902 to conclude their first formal alliance for a nearly a century with the emerging power of Japan. Three years later Russia was defeated and brought to the verge of revolution by war with Japan, so in 1907 she was happy to conclude an agreement with Britain over the disputed borderlands of Persia and Afghanistan, thus creating a ‘Triple Entente’. Beyond Europe, Britain took care to remain on friendly terms with the United States. American appetite for naval expansion had been whetted by victory over Spain in 1899 and

annexation of her possessions in the Pacific, but British statesmen realized that America's immense resources meant that confrontation with her should be avoided at almost any cost. So traditional rivalries were appeased by the virtual abandonment of a British naval presence in the western hemisphere and the careful cultivation of a harmony between British and American elites based on 'Anglo-Saxon' consanguinity and shared political values.

Although Britain concluded no formal alliances except that with Japan, the Germans complained that the British were weaving a web to encircle and imprison them, and relations grew steadily worse. In 1911, when the Germans attempted to humiliate the French by challenging their influence in Morocco with a naval demonstration off Agadir, the British made their support for the French explicit. Many people in Britain and Germany began to regard each other as natural enemies, and war between them as inevitable.

But, when war did break out three years later, it was at the other end of Europe, in the Balkans, as Bismarck himself had gloomily foreseen.

The Balkan Crises

Without Bismarck's calming hand, relations between Austria-Hungary and Russia deteriorated as badly as those between Britain and Germany. The Balkan state that the Austrians most feared was Serbia, especially since their protectorate over Bosnia-Herzegovina had placed many Serbs under Austrian control. In 1903 a *coup d'état* in Belgrade had overthrown the Obrenovic dynasty that had pursued a course of conciliation towards the Dual Monarchy, and replaced it with a regime dedicated to the expansion of Serbia through the liberation of Serbs under foreign rule – especially those in Bosnia. Five years later Austria formally annexed Bosnia-Herzegovina to facilitate her control over those provinces. The Serb government responded by creating an open 'liberation