

Hence the climate of opinion certainly cannot provide a full explanation of what happened. Hence we must turn to the key events that led to a deterioration of international affairs and finally to war.

2 German Diplomacy after Bismarck, 1890–96

KEY ISSUE Why did Germany's position in European affairs deteriorate in this period?

In the six years following Bismarck's fall, German foreign policy lacked a clear sense of direction and her international position was greatly weakened. France and Russia made an alliance, but Germany failed, as a response, to bind Britain more closely to the Triple Alliance. Indeed Anglo-German relations declined dramatically. Germany's leaders lacked the skill to translate ideas into successful policies.

a) The 'New Course'

Bismarck's successor as Chancellor, Caprivi, began a 'New Course' from 1890, deliberately rejecting Bismarck's system. This involved the crucial decision, taken in 1890, not to renew the Reinsurance Treaty of 1887 with Russia (see page 35). This was mainly due to Holstein, a senior official in the foreign ministry who persuaded the Chancellor and the Kaiser that the treaty was incompatible with Germany's commitments to her other allies, especially Austria-Hungary. This decision prepared the ground for the major event of the decade in international affairs – the Franco-Russian Alliance of 1892–94.

France, a democratic Republic, and Russia, ruled by an autocratic Tsar, seem strange bedfellows. A common fear of Germany would be the obvious explanation for their unnatural union. In the early 1890s, however, Russia had no serious conflict with Germany and wanted to renew the Reinsurance Treaty. The initiative for the alliance came from France who, for the sake of security from a German attack, wanted a military agreement with Russia. The French proposals did not appeal to the Tsar's more conservative ministers, but Russia needed loans from France now that the Germans were unwilling to grant them (see page 33). Two separate agreements were made – a political *entente* in 1891, followed by a military convention a year later. The political agreement was anti-British in intent, aligning France with Russia in imperial disputes. In the military convention, France and Russia promised mutual support if either were attacked by Germany, and immediate mobilisation in response to mobilisation by one or more of the Triple Alliance Powers. France had to wait until 1894 for the Tsar's confirmation, and the signing of a full-scale alliance.

The Franco-Russian Alliance brought to an end the Bismarckian system by which Germany had directed the affairs of Europe for two decades. France had now broken out from the 'quarantine' imposed on her by Bismarck. The ultimate significance of the Alliance was not lost on Berlin: Germany now faced the prospect of a war on two fronts. Her response was the Schlieffen Plan.

The Schlieffen Plan

Count Alfred von Schlieffen was Chief of the German General Staff in 1891–1905. It was his job to plan an appropriate military strategy to combat the Franco-Russian combination. His idea was that Germany should avoid fighting on two fronts simultaneously, since this would necessitate a dangerous division of German resources. If war broke out, Germany, he decided, should deliver a knock-out blow against France in the west in six weeks. Then German forces should move to the eastern front to fight the larger but more slowly mobilising Russian army. The Schlieffen Plan was worked out in the 1890s and was complete by 1906. It was a scheme to which Germany became committed.

The potential danger to Germany from the Franco-Russian Alliance could have been partially offset by the conclusion of an Anglo-German alliance. British naval power and German military strength would have made a formidable combination. Moreover, Germany could expect to enlist British support against Russia for the defence of Austro-Hungarian interests in the Balkans. Yet although an alliance with Britain was a major element of Caprivi's 'New Course', the German leaders failed to secure it.

The prospects for an alliance seemed good in the early 1890s when cordiality was the keynote of Anglo-German relations. In the Heligoland-Zanzibar Treaty of 1890 (see page 49), Germany made generous concessions to satisfy British claims in East Africa. Another factor was Britain's rivalry with France and Russia. The Germans, however, failed to capitalise on this mood. They were perhaps complacent, believing that sooner or later Britain would have to seek an alliance. One obstacle, however, was the aversion of Lord Salisbury (who doubled up as prime minister and foreign secretary in 1887–92 and 1895–1900), to a formal alliance. His wanted 'the advantages of friendship without the encumbering engagements of an alliance'.

An opportunity for creating closer ties with Britain arose in 1894 when the then British Prime Minister, Lord Rosebery, reassured the Austrians of his determination to defend Constantinople. But to ensure that Britain had to deal with Russia only, he required a commitment from Germany that she would keep France in check. In

Berlin, however, this was regarded as a clumsy British trick. Caprivi wrongly suspected that Britain wanted a free hand to attack Russia whenever she chose, leaving Germany to face the risk of war with France. Hence the German government lost a real chance to strengthen the links between Britain and the Triple Alliance. They had miscalculated, believing Britain needed Germany more than Germany needed Britain. Soon relations between the two countries were to deteriorate.

KAISER WILHELM II
(who lived from 1859–1941
and reigned in 1888–
1918)

Wilhelm was born in 1859, the eldest son of Crown Prince Frederick and his wife Victoria, the daughter of Britain's Queen Victoria. It was a difficult birth: the umbilical cord was wrapped round the neck of the baby, so that his brain was probably starved of oxygen for a short time, and his left arm was ripped out of its socket. It seems that he was scarred psychologically, but not so much by his withered left arm as by the fact that his parents made him undergo painful exercises – and even more painful electric shock treatment – to improve it. He was never allowed to forget his disability in his formative years (even though he later disguised it very well, as in the portrait on the cover of this book), and he compensated by an aggressive masculinity. He was also confused about his identity – half-German and half-British – and developed a strange love-hate relationship with Britain.

Several historians believe that Wilhelm was disturbed mentally. Bismarck remarked that he was 'like a balloon. If you do not hold fast to the string, you never know where he will be off to.' A friend described him on a sea-voyage in 1903 wandering about the ship 'as if in a dream-world, often his face completely distorted with rage. Sometimes he appeared to have lost discipline over himself entirely ... Pale, ranting wildly, looking restlessly about him and piling lie upon lie, he made such a terrible impression on me that I still cannot get over it.'

This was the man who became Kaiser in 1888 and dismissed Bismarck two years later. Some see him as a positive menace in international relations, as the man who – more than any other

-Profile-



single person – was responsible for the Great War. Others, however, call him a 'shadow emperor', a man who did not work hard enough to rule as well as reign. As Bismarck remarked, he wanted 'every day to be a Sunday' (a day of rest). According to this school of thought, responsibility for the war that broke out in 1914 lies elsewhere.

It is important to remember that Wilhelm II possessed great political power. A complex character whose moods were liable to change very rapidly and violently, he sometimes ignored official business but occasionally intervened decisively to influence policy. Hence while he was Kaiser it is difficult to say who controlled German policy. He was certainly a powerful voice at times, but on the whole power was diffused. The Kaiser, the Chancellor, the foreign minister, foreign ministry officials, and army and navy chiefs – all these played a role in determining German foreign policy. Unlike in Bismarck's day, the aims of German diplomacy were now seldom defined or clear priorities established.

Wilhelm abdicated in 1918 and spent the rest of his life as an exile in Holland.

b) Germany 'The Troublemaker'

After Caprivi's resignation in 1894, the German government, despairing of Britain as an ally, turned to alternative lines of policy. The first was an attempt to turn the clock back to 1890 by seeking agreement with Russia. Yet, despite the conclusion of a commercial treaty favourable to Russian agrarian interests, the Tsar would not jettison the alliance with France. Even so, Russo-German relations were quite cordial for some years, helped by the fact that the new Tsar, Nicholas II, got on well with the Kaiser, his cousin.

Having failed to secure an agreement with Russia, the Germans tried a different course. This amounted to a policy of meddling almost at random in colonial issues, such as boundary disputes in the Sudan, the future of the Portuguese colonies in Africa, and doing so with a bullying and offensive tone. Even when Germany had reasonable grounds for her actions, her style of diplomacy caused considerable offence as well as puzzlement at her motives. This was particularly the case in London. Salisbury said in 1895 that 'The conduct of the German Emperor is very mysterious and difficult to explain. There is a danger of his going completely off his head.'

The culmination of this type of diplomacy was the affair of the 'Kruger Telegram' in 1896. The Jameson raid, an armed attack (initiated by Cecil Rhodes, using British South Africa Company police) to incite an uprising in Johannesburg against the Boers, was

an illegal act against the Transvaal state. As thousands of Germans were active in the commercial life of the country, it was quite proper for the German government to express concern. Their manner of proceeding, however, was very clumsy. Once Berlin was informed that the raid had not been approved by the British government, the matter might have been allowed to rest. Instead, the Germans invited French and Russian co-operation against Britain, hoping that this sort of pressure would induce her to join the Triple Alliance. When the French and Russians refused, the Kaiser sent a telegram, to Kruger, the Boer President, supporting the independence of the Transvaal. The British press treated the Kaiser's action as a gross interference in Britain's imperial affairs. According to the German ambassador in London, 'If the [British] government had wished for war ... it would have had the whole of public opinion behind it'.

c) Germany's Foreign Relations around 1896

Anglo-German relations, so cordial in 1890, were now frosty. But it was not only Anglo-German relations that had deteriorated since Bismarck's fall. In 1890 Berlin had been the focal point of European diplomacy, with the Triple Alliance and the Reinsurance Treaty. By 1896, however, France was the ally of Russia, and Germany's international position was much less secure. Clearly, German diplomacy since 1890 had been a conspicuous failure. Yet even now the German government had no intention of pursuing policies of restraint and caution.

3 *Weltpolitik* and the End of British Isolation, 1897–1904

KEY ISSUES What was meant by *Weltpolitik*? What motives lay behind it and why did it alienate Britain?

a) The Motives behind *Weltpolitik*

In 1897, Germany embarked on a 'World Policy' (*Weltpolitik*). This was a conscious rejection of Bismarck's policies, which had been centred on Europe. The emphasis was now on expansion, especially overseas expansion, and on the creation of a big navy.

Weltpolitik did not have a very precise meaning, but it is a convenient term to sum up the expansionist phase of German policy that began in the late 1890s. 1897 is usually regarded as marking its beginning. In that year the Kaiser made two important changes in his ministers. Bülow was appointed to the foreign ministry and Admiral von Tirpitz to head the navy office. The latter appointment, followed by German Naval Bills in 1898 and 1900, signified that Germany was to

begin the construction of a powerful battle fleet. The role of the new foreign minister, Bülow, was twofold. Firstly, he was to foster good relations with Britain while the German fleet was in its infancy. Secondly, he had to improve Germany's position on the world stage and satisfy the German people's craving for 'a place in the sun' – a tropical empire. The Kaiser, himself an enthusiast for expansion, said in 1898, 'Germany has great tasks to accomplish outside the narrow boundaries of old Europe'.

What these 'great tasks' were is not very obvious. As Germany's army commander remarked around this time: 'We are supposed to pursue *Weltpolitik*. If only we knew what it was supposed to mean.' Whether its content or ultimate objectives were ever clearly defined is still a matter of debate. Contemporary observers, as well as modern historians, were uncertain how to interpret *Weltpolitik*. Eyre Crowe, a Foreign Office official, commented on it in 1907 in these terms:

- 1 Either Germany is definitely aiming at a general political hegemony and maritime ascendancy, threatening the independence of her neighbours and ultimately the existence of England; or Germany, free from any such clear-cut ambition and thinking for the present merely of using her legitimate position and influence as one of the leading powers ... is seeking to promote her foreign commerce ... and create fresh German interests all over the world wherever and whenever a peaceful opportunity offers, leaving it to an uncertain future to decide whether the occurrence of great changes in the world may not some day assign to
- 10 Germany a larger share of direct political action over regions not now part of her dominions without that violation of the established rights of other countries which would be involved in any such action under existing political conditions.

Behind the pursuit of *Weltpolitik* there lay a vague longing to be a World Power. Many Germans were conscious of their nation's growing power. Second only to Britain as the world's largest trading and commercial nation, Germany also ranked second (after the USA) in the world as a great industrial nation. Yet this economic strength was not reflected in the size of her overseas empire, and this was a grievance to many. Alongside the 'world empires' of the USA, Russia and the British Empire, Germany's territories seemed inadequate. Eyre Crowe believed that:

- 1 the dream of a colonial empire had taken deep hold on the German imagination. Emperor, statesmen, journalists, ... economists ... and the whole mass of ... public opinion continue with one voice to declare: We must have real colonies ... and we must have a fleet and coaling
- 5 stations to keep together the colonies we are bound to acquire.

It was pressures such as these which induced Bülow to assert: 'We can't do anything other than carry out *Weltpolitik*'.

Yet most historians are not fully satisfied with this explanation.

They see Germany's unstable and old-fashioned political system, dominated by the Kaiser, as an important reason for the adoption of *Weltpolitik*. The course of German foreign policy after 1897 is seen, at one level, as a response to democracy and socialism.

Industrial growth promoted the wealth of the middle classes and also the size of the working classes – and both of these groups wanted to achieve political power. Particularly worrying was the rise of the German Socialist Party (SPD). It won 35 seats in the Reichstag in 1890 (out of 397); but this number rose to 56 in 1898. The old arrangement therefore, where power lay above all with the Kaiser and the landowners, seemed unlikely to last. Hence it can be argued that the traditional ruling classes resorted to 'diversionary tactics' to distract opinion from domestic tensions and problems by pursuing prestige on a world scale. Bülow said: 'Only a successful foreign policy can help to reconcile, rally and unite.' A large and successful navy might even transform the Kaiser into a popular hero. In short, imperialism was a substitute for unwanted social change – hence the phrase 'social imperialism'. Or at least *Weltpolitik* was expected to rally the 'patriotic forces' – Conservatives, National Liberals and the Catholic Party – behind the government. According to this view, the primary motivation behind German foreign policy was the need to stabilise domestic politics.

It seems likely that there was no masterplan behind *Weltpolitik*. It was a strange mixture of reasonable aspirations and some justified claims, combined with ill-defined objectives. Perhaps for this reason, the achievements of German diplomacy in the period from 1897 to 1904 were rather limited. Kiaochow was obtained from China as a naval base in 1897 and the Shantung province claimed as Germany's 'sphere of interest' for economic exploitation. She purchased a group of islands in the Pacific (the Carolines, Marshalls and Marianas) from Spain in 1898. Negotiations with Britain over the future of Portugal's empire in Africa seemed to offer the prospect of more substantial colonial gains which might have made a reality of German aspirations to dominate 'middle Africa' (*Mittelafrika*). The British government, however, played a double game by averting the bankruptcy of Portugal on which German hopes were based. A joint Anglo-German blockade of Venezuela, which had defaulted on its foreign debts, in 1902–03 was a sign of the willingness of the two governments to co-operate; but the bombardment of a port by the German flotilla created a storm in the British press, forcing the government to abandon the blockade.

b) Anglo-German Relations

The British press also frustrated the attempt by the Conservative government in England to co-operate with Germany in the Berlin-Baghdad railway scheme. The British government was willing to support this ambitious project, which was designed to open up the

Near East to European (especially German) economic penetration, on condition that certain key sections of the line were under international control. It was the pressure of 'this anti-German fever', as Lansdowne, Salisbury's successor as foreign secretary, called it, that obliged the government to withdraw its support in 1903.

Clearly, public opinion in Britain and Germany was becoming a significant factor in Anglo-German relations. Economic rivalry between the two great manufacturing and trading nations was keenly felt, aggravated by disputes over tariff policies. In Germany, 'anglo-phobia' (hatred of England) reached its height during the Boer War, 1899–1902. In Britain, 'Germanophobia' became quite pronounced in the 1900s. (In 1894 William Le Queux's best-selling novel, *The Great War in England in 1897*, had depicted a Franco-Russian invasion of England which was repulsed with the aid of Germany. But since then there had been a complete turn-around: Germany was now popularly depicted as the aggressor in British popular fiction. Le Queux jumped on the bandwagon, with *The Invasion of 1910*.) This was partly a result of the second Navy Law of 1900, which doubled the size of the projected German fleet, giving rise to fears for Britain's naval supremacy.

The growing antagonism had more serious implications for Germany than Britain. An important element in German policy was to allay British suspicions while the German navy was being expanded. The Kaiser had done his best by successful visits to England. Bülow, on the other hand, was quite convinced that Britain's imperial rivalries with Russia and, to a lesser extent, with France must inevitably lead to war. It therefore followed that it would be a mistake for Germany to align herself with Britain and thereby antagonise Russia. All Germany had to do was to wait for the inevitable conflict, and then extract a high price for her favours. Hence Bülow's delight at the Fashoda crisis of 1898 (see page 50) and, early in 1904, at the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese war. Britain, he assumed, would become involved as the ally of Japan. Bülow's policy had had a certain logic to it, but it also contained a fatal flaw. It made no allowance for Britain resolving her imperial rivalries without war.

By the turn of the century leading Conservative ministers, especially Chamberlain, the very influential colonial secretary, shared Bülow's pessimistic appraisal of Britain's situation in the world. 'Splendid Isolation' seemed outmoded for 'the weary Titan' staggering under the 'too vast orb of his fate', as Chamberlain put it. His solution, pursued from 1898 to 1901, was an alliance with Germany. Yet it made no sense for Germany to antagonise Russia in the Far East where, for the most part, her activities did not threaten the interests of Germany or her allies. As a result, disappointed with Germany, British ministers slowly came to appreciate more fully the value of Japan as an ally to check Russian ambitions in China.

The Anglo-Japanese Alliance of 1902 seemed to mark the formal

abandonment of Britain's 'isolation'. It also acted as a catalyst to the negotiations for an Anglo-French *entente*, or agreement. The British government became increasingly anxious, in the course of 1903, to reach an agreement with France as tension mounted between Russia and Japan. Lansdowne, the foreign secretary, was alarmed at the prospect that Britain and France might become involved in this conflict (as allies of the main protagonists) if they did not reach an accord. Once the French foreign minister had accepted that Egypt would have to be included in the bargaining, a basis for a colonial understanding existed. In return for a French undertaking not to obstruct British rule in Egypt, Britain accepted France's claim to a predominant influence in Morocco (see page 64). The *Entente Cordiale* of 1904, whilst not constituting an alliance, indicated a mutual desire to put aside past quarrels and co-operate in the future. By 1904, therefore, Britain's international position was much less precarious than it had been in 1897–98. She now had Japan as an ally and France as an *Entente* partner, who might also be able to smooth Britain's path towards an agreement with Russia.

Although not anti-German in intent, the *Entente* had serious implications for Germany. No longer could Berlin count on the antagonism between Britain and France. Holstein's comment that 'no overseas policy is possible against England and France' indicates that *Weltpolitik* had suffered a major setback. Even the 'silver lining' of the Russo-Japanese war turned out to be a false hope. German expectations rose as Russia turned to Berlin for support, but Bülow's hopes of a Russo-German alliance were dashed by the Tsar's insistence on consulting France.

By the end of 1904, therefore, few of the aims of German diplomacy in 1897 had been achieved. Despite the fanfares, *Weltpolitik* had added little to Germany's overseas empire. Admittedly the navy programme was proving very popular in Germany; but the British Admiralty feared in 1904, if not sooner, that 'the German fleet is designed for a possible conflict with Britain'. To meet the challenge, Britain took counter-measures. One consolation for Germany was that Russia's involvement in the Far East made Germany feel more secure in Europe. If the war against Japan weakened Russia's ability to play a major role in European affairs, Germany might be able to alter the European balance of power in her favour. This would make up for some of the disappointments of the period 1897 to 1904.

4 Crises and Tension, 1905–9

KEY ISSUES What were the causes of the crises over Morocco in 1905 and Bosnia in 1908? How close did the Great Powers come to war?

A new and significant factor in the international situation between 1905 and 1909 was the temporary eclipse of Russia as a Great Power.

This major upset in the balance of power was the result of Russia's defeat by Japan in the Far East and the outbreak of revolution at home. Russia's weakness gave Germany an opportunity to free herself from the 'encirclement' which the Franco-Russian Alliance and the Anglo-French *Entente* had seemingly created around her. As we see in the rest of this section, Germany attempted to break the *Entente* by threatening France over Morocco in 1905; and then she tried to weaken the Franco-Russian Alliance by seeking a defensive alliance with Russia. Having failed in both attempts, Germany exploited Russia's continuing weakness by forcing her to climb down in the Bosnian affair in 1909.

a) First Moroccan Crisis

In the spring of 1905, Germany provoked a crisis. The prime object was to inflict a diplomatic defeat on France over the issue of Morocco. In January 1905, a French mission had arrived in Fez, the capital of Morocco, to induce the Sultan to accept a programme of reforms under exclusive French supervision. The French mission had aroused German fears that Morocco would become 'another Tunisia' – another French protectorate. If this happened, German commercial interests would suffer. As a dramatic way of asserting Germany's right to be consulted in such matters, the Kaiser landed at the Moroccan port of Tangier in March 1905. In declaring his intention of upholding the independence of Morocco, the German Emperor was throwing down a challenge to France.

This was made clear in mid-April when the German government demanded an international conference to review the question of Morocco. Germany based this demand on an international agreement signed in 1880, guaranteeing full commercial freedom in Morocco, so she had quite a good case. 'If we allow our feet to be stepped on in Morocco without a protest,' noted a German diplomat, 'we simply encourage others to do the same somewhere else.' Yet if Germany only wanted 'compensation' for French gains in Morocco, she could have used normal diplomatic channels. As it was, her forceful, unorthodox methods caused diplomatic unease.

The French and British governments were puzzled. They could not see the objectives of German policy. It is helpful to regard German policy as operating on two levels. On the surface, they were demanding 'fair shares for all' and the right to be consulted about Morocco's fate. Yet their hidden aim was probably to weaken, if not destroy, the Anglo-French *Entente* (which the German foreign office had described as 'one of the worst defeats for German policy' since the 1894 Franco-Russian Alliance). This was to be achieved by demonstrating that Britain was not a reliable or worthwhile ally. France, it was assumed, would be outvoted at the international conference since other nations would not favour French predominance in Morocco.

Then, humiliated by this check to their aspirations, the French would recognise that co-operation with Germany, not Britain, was essential. To accomplish this, it was necessary to keep up the tension until the French government gave in to Germany's demands. This aggressive policy was pursued through the summer of 1905, backed by the unspoken threat of war. Some historians believe, in fact, that the German Chief of Staff was hoping the crisis would provide an excuse for an attack on France. Certainly Russia's weakness did create a very favourable opportunity for a preventive war against France. But the evidence for this interpretation is not strong.

Germany's actions, coupled with her refusal to negotiate directly with France, created a panic in government circles in Paris. The French army was in no condition to meet a surprise attack, and moreover no help could now be expected from Russia. So the French decided to sacrifice foreign minister Delcassé – the architect of the *Entente Cordiale* – to placate the Germans. His downfall is regarded by some historians as an important motive behind Germany's actions, and it is true that the Kaiser attributed many of the recent setbacks to German diplomacy to Delcassé's skilful mediation between Russia and England. His resignation was regarded as a sign of French weakness in Britain. But at least the British could take heart: if the *Entente* was weakening, it was not needed now to restrain Russia in the Far East, not after Japan's great victory.

In July 1905 the French prime minister gave way to the German demand for a conference that would meet in 1906 at Algeçiras. The 'security and independence' of Morocco would be decided by international agreement, not by Britain and France. Germany had demonstrated that she was a 'World Power' whose views could not be ignored. All that remained to be done was to ensure France's defeat at the conference.

Although the Germans had won their point over Morocco, they failed to capitalise on it. A blow to Germany's hopes of dominating the conference at Algeçiras came with the election of a Liberal government in Britain. The previous foreign secretary, Lansdowne, had judged German policy towards Morocco to be an 'escapade', 'an extraordinarily clumsy bit of diplomacy'. His successor, Sir Edward Grey, was even more critical and so insisted on complete support for France at the conference (even when she rejected reasonable compromises). He even let it be known to the French ambassador, though only as his personal opinion, that Britain would support France if she were attacked by Germany.

After weeks of deadlock at the conference, the Germans finally gave way. She had too few supporters. France secured virtual control of the police and the state bank in Morocco; Germany had to be content with mere guarantees of commercial freedom. Algeçiras was a bad blow for German prestige. As a demonstration of *Weltpolitik*, the Moroccan affair was a disaster. Although France was very vulnerable

to pressure in the spring of 1905, Germany had extracted very little advantage from the situation. This was due to a mixture of miscalculation and inconsistency of aims. Direct negotiations with France could have produced positive gains, including 'compensation', if not in Morocco then in the French Congo. The First Moroccan Crisis, therefore, is a good example of the weaknesses of *Weltpolitik* – heavy-handed methods combined with uncertainty of aims.

The outcome was the opposite of what was intended. Far from weakening the Anglo-French *Entente*, the crisis strengthened it. 'Cordial co-operation with France' became a basic principle of British foreign policy under Grey. Furthermore, he authorised 'military conversations' in January 1906 to consider how Britain might aid France if Germany attacked. This has been called a 'revolution in European affairs'. For the first time in 40 years a British government considered despatching an expeditionary force to the Continent. 'The long Bismarckian peace' was over. Several states had contemplated war. It was a sign of things to come.

As a direct result of the first Moroccan Crisis, Grey regarded Germany as a threat to the balance of power in Europe. This was a new anxiety that had not troubled British governments for several decades. The answer to this threat, Grey concluded, was an *entente* that included England, France and Russia so that, 'If it is necessary to check Germany it could then be done'.

b) The Anglo-Russian *Entente*

Negotiations for an agreement with Russia began in April 1906, covering three disputed regions: Persia, Tibet and Afghanistan. Following her defeat in the Far East, Russia was more willing to compromise than in the past. Whereas British ministers had been trying to make an agreement with Russia since at least 1897, many of the Tsar's advisers had not seen much advantage in reducing tension with Britain. The new Russian foreign minister, Izvolsky, however, conscious of Russia's weakness, was anxious to improve her relations with Britain and the other Powers.

After lengthy negotiations from April 1906 to August 1907, agreement was reached on the main issues. Persia was divided into three zones: a Russian zone adjacent to her frontier; a British zone in the south-east covering the Indian border; and a neutral zone separating the two. The agreements on Tibet and Afghanistan also contributed to the security of India, long the key issue in Anglo-Russian antagonism. In effect, both sides agreed not to meddle in the internal affairs of these two 'buffer states'. The Anglo-Russian convention of August 1907 might have begun a new era in Britain's relations with Russia. Yet its significance was for several years uncertain, as the Russians cheated persistently on the Persian agreement.

Grey strove hard to promote good Anglo-Russian relations. This

was a sign that Europe, not the empire, was now the focal point of British policy and that Germany, not Russia, was now identified as the main potential enemy. He also tried to take a more tolerant view of Russia's aspirations in the Balkans, recognising that 'good relations with Russia meant that our old policy of closing the Straits' to her warships should end. This willingness to review the issue of the passage of Russian warships between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean made it easier for Izvolsky, the Russian foreign minister, to persuade his colleagues to accept the 1907 agreement.

The strategic and economic importance of the Straits to Russia was steadily increasing in this period. To secure control over 'the keys and gates of the Russian house' was widely regarded as 'Russia's most important task in the 20th century'. So tempting a prize were they that Izvolsky was prepared to give a lot in return for international agreement to changing the Rule of the Straits of 1841, so as to allow Russian warships to pass from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean. In a rather impulsive and dangerous way, Izvolsky launched himself into unofficial talks with other European foreign ministers.

c) The Bosnian Crisis of 1908

The Austro-Hungarian foreign minister, Aehrenthal, was quite receptive to the idea of a 'deal' with Russia since he was considering a project of his own in the Balkans – the annexation of Bosnia. An agreement in 1897 had put the Balkans 'on ice' for a decade. Instead of confrontation, Austria and Russia experimented with co-operation. But now Aehrenthal decided that the time had come to end the ambiguous status of Bosnia which, together with Herzegovina, had been controlled by Austria since the Congress of Berlin in 1878.

Austria's rights in these two provinces seemed in 1908 to be at risk. A new regime, the 'Young Turks' had just come to power in Constantinople, dedicated to the revival of the Ottoman Empire (see page 14). Restoring Bosnia to full Turkish rule was one of their objectives. To prevent this, Austria decided formally to annex the provinces. This would draw a clear line between what was Austrian territory and what was Turkish. The Turks, not surprisingly, saw it differently. To them it looked like seizure of a Turkish province and they demanded compensation. The annexation of Bosnia also angered Serbia because she regarded the Bosnian Serbs as belonging to a future 'Greater Serbia'. There was also the fear that, after Bosnia, she might be the next to be taken over. Too weak to challenge the Austrians by herself, she looked to Russia for support.

Would Russia support Serbia? Izvolsky did not want to. In return for Austria's acceptance of Russia's desire to control the Straits, he agreed in September 1908 – without the knowledge or approval of his prime minister – to the annexation of Bosnia. This was a betrayal of

Serbia, Russia's most recent client state in the Balkans. Russia was in fact in a very embarrassing situation. Tension mounted when Serbia demanded compensation and threatened war. In January 1909 the German government decided that – while Russia was still too weak to face a war – this was a favourable moment for Austria to smash Serbia, so she promised Austria simultaneous mobilisation as a sign of her full support.

Neither France nor Britain showed any such support for Russia. They conveniently blamed Izvolsky for the crisis. Tension continued until late March, when Russia accepted Germany's 'ultimatum' that she recognise the annexation of Bosnia. Serbia, threatened with war by Austria, climbed down and agreed to 'live at peace' with Austria-Hungary.

The Bosnian crisis did not lead to war, but it made Balkan problems worse and created much alarm in Europe. Russia felt humiliated, while Serbia was embittered. It also revealed that the Austro-German Alliance was much more solid than the Triple *Entente*, of Russia, France and Britain. Above all, the crisis ended the Austro-Russian agreement over the Balkans. Further troubles lay ahead.

The years 1905 to 1909 saw a great increase in international tension. Germany's responsibility for this was considerable. She had provoked the Moroccan crisis, exploiting Russia's weakness to threaten France. Although not a prime mover in the opening of the Bosnian affair, she chose to back Austria to the hilt in January 1909, even though her ally had not consulted her about the annexation plan. Germany could have exercised a moderating influence. Instead she chose the opposite path. Before the Bosnian crisis was over, Germany was involved in another source of tension in Europe – the naval race with Britain.

5 Naval Rivalry and the Agadir Crisis, 1908–11

KEY ISSUES Why did these years see an escalation of tension? How close did the Great Powers come to war?

a) Overview

In the winter of 1908–9 a 'naval scare' erupted in England through fear of Germany's expanding fleet. Britain had launched in 1906 the new all-big-gun battleship, HMS *Dreadnought*. It had greater firepower and greater speed than anything else afloat. But so superior was it that many experts judged that existing battleships were obsolete – and hence Britain's massive lead in conventional ships no longer seemed to count. There was widespread alarm. By 1908 the damage done to Anglo-German relations made both governments consider proposals to reduce their building programmes, but nothing came of the talks

that lasted from 1908 to 1912. British suspicions of Germany deepened further in 1911, when a second crisis arose over Morocco (the Agadir Crisis). Alarmed at how close to war they had been, the British government renewed its efforts for an Anglo-German understanding, but without success.

b) The Naval Race

The prime objective of the Navy Laws of 1898 and 1900, prepared by Admiral von Tirpitz, was to create a powerful battle fleet of about 60 large warships by 1918, designed for operations in the North Sea. The German navy would have grown in size even if Tirpitz had not been appointed chief of the navy office in 1897. Navies were becoming status symbols, and for many Germans naval expansion was a natural expression of their economic power and growing overseas trade. Tirpitz's battle fleet, however, was conceived as a 'power-political instrument' (not as a commerce-protection fleet) to be used as a lever to obtain colonial concessions from Britain. The objective of challenging Britain to secure what he called 'world political freedom' for Germany was implicit in the Tirpitz Plan from the outset. It was not made explicit for obvious reasons, and this made many Britons fear that the Kaiser was in fact preparing for an Anglo-German naval war.

The plan suffered from several miscalculations. The British Admiralty instituted counter-measures from 1902. The re-deployment of ships previously scattered across the globe concentrated a more powerful fleet in home waters and battleship construction was raised to four ships a year from 1905. A major reason for the navy scare of 1908–9 was the drastic reduction in this construction programme by the new Liberal government, elected in 1906, which wanted to reduce expenditure on armaments. The reduction also coincided with an increase in the German building tempo to four a ships a year. Hence the fear that by 1911 Germany could have 13 Dreadnoughts to Britain's 12. Yielding to pressure, the Liberal government reluctantly accepted the demand for no less than eight battleships in the naval estimates for 1909. The naval race was on!

In Britain, opponents of the naval race, including the pro-German members of the Cabinet, pressed for negotiations with Germany to reduce international tension. In Germany, both Bülow and his successor as Chancellor in 1909, Bethmann Hollweg, were alarmed at the strength of British hostility to Germany over the navy issue. But neither Wilhelm II nor Tirpitz was willing to make substantial concessions. For the Kaiser the navy was an obsession – it was 'his fleet' and he angrily rejected any interference with it or with his position as 'Supreme War Lord'.

Negotiations for a naval agreement began in 1909. In reply to Britain's proposals for naval reductions, the Chancellor offered a relaxation of the tempo of construction for three years – but only if

Britain were to agree to remain neutral in a Franco-German or Russo-German war. As Grey commented, such an agreement would leave Britain isolated. Further negotiations in 1910 foundered on the same rock.

The damage done to Anglo-German relations by the naval rivalry was immense. It crystallised, as no other issue could do, all the latent fears and suspicions of Germany's aims. It also caught the attention of the press and public opinion much more forcefully than did other issues. A newspaper editor warned Germany in 1905: 'Any power which challenges Britain's supremacy offers her a menace which she cannot ignore'. In similar vein, the foreign secretary insisted in 1913, 'The Navy is our one and only means of defence and our life depends upon it'.

Germany, by contrast, was first and foremost a continental Power, whose security depended primarily on her army. When the leading military Power became the second naval Power in Europe, Britain's security was felt to be at risk. For the first time for almost half a century, Britons were aware of the danger of invasion. Hence the determination to maintain her naval supremacy regardless of cost. From the German perspective, however, Britain was behaving as though naval supremacy belonged to her by some sort of 'divine right'. But it was dishonest of German leaders, such as Tirpitz and the Kaiser, to pretend that their fleet programme was compatible with Anglo-German friendship. The effect of this naval rivalry in increasing the British government's suspicions of German aims was revealed in 1911.

c) The Agadir Crisis, 1911

The Second Moroccan Crisis began in July 1911 when a German gunboat, the *Panther*, arrived at the Moroccan port of Agadir. The aim was to intimidate the French government into paying substantial territorial compensation in return for recognition of a French protectorate over Morocco. French troops had occupied the capital, Fez, in May, at the Sultan's request, following the outbreak of a revolt. This was widely regarded as prelude to a French take-over. That would break the Algeçiras Act of 1906, and Germany did have a justified grievance.

The crux of the dispute in 1911 was how much territorial compensation Germany could extract from France and what degree of pressure was required to achieve it. There is no doubt that the German foreign minister, Kiderlen, grossly mishandled the situation. He attempted to pull off a 'great stroke' – impressing German public opinion by a prestige victory while at the same time winning French goodwill by accepting a protectorate over Morocco. But he set his target too high – demanding the whole of the French Congo – and conducted German diplomacy in an extremely provocative way. Neither the Chancellor nor the Kaiser shared his enthusiasm for

'thumping the table', as he put it. The French government was prepared to pay what they considered a fair price for Germany's goodwill. But Kiderlen convinced himself that only threats would succeed: 'They must feel that we are prepared to go to the extreme.'

By persisting throughout July in his demand for the whole of the French Congo, Kiderlen made a quick and amicable settlement impossible. His main miscalculation, however, was in not seeing that the unspoken threat to France could only succeed if Britain stayed out of the affair. But the British government, uneasy at the *Panther* incident, became alarmed after their enquiries to Berlin met with total



SOLID.

GERMANY. "DONNERWETTER! IT'S ROCK. I THOUGHT IT WAS GOING TO BE PAPER."

Cartoon from *Punch*, 2 Aug 1911.

silence. In late July, Lloyd George, a powerful Cabinet minister hitherto noted for his pro-German sentiments, gave a speech at the Mansion House in London which demonstrated that Britain had no intention of being ignored in any agreement over Morocco. Once again, the Anglo-French *Entente* was solid (see the cartoon opposite).

After this speech the crisis took a new turn. What had begun as a Franco-German colonial squabble became a major Anglo-German confrontation. The British government was certainly over-reacting when the fleet was put on the alert and plans for British military assistance to France were finalised.

It was a rather bizarre situation. There seemed more likelihood of a war between Britain and Germany than between France and Germany. However, in early November a Franco-German agreement was eventually signed. Germany obtained only two meagre strips of territory in the French Congo – to the fury of German opinion, which had been led to expect a great triumph. Kiderlen's 'great stroke' had failed all round. He had not won popularity for the government and he had antagonised, not conciliated, France. This was an example of *Weltpolitik* at its worst – confusion of aims and heavy-handed methods, resulting in limited gains for Germany at the price of considerable tension.

In England, the risk of war during the Agadir Crisis revived the pressure for Anglo-German conciliation, but the mission of Lord Haldane, the war minister, to Berlin in February 1912 was not a success. The Germans repeated their demand for a neutrality pact, offering in exchange only a slower rate of warship construction.

Having failed to secure a naval limitation treaty with Germany, Britain negotiated a naval agreement with France in 1912–13. In essence, this made Britain responsible for the Channel while France was to guard the Mediterranean. Taken in conjunction with the 'military conversations' revived in 1911, Britain had made an extensive, albeit informal, commitment to the defence of France by 1913. Anglo-Russian naval talks were also held, in secret, in 1914 but no agreement had been reached by the outbreak of war.

d) Conclusion

The period after Bismarck's fall saw a significant escalation of tensions in European affairs. The successors of the 'Iron Chancellor' clearly lacked his diplomatic skill, setting themselves tasks to which they were unequal. That war seemed a possibility during the two Moroccan crisis is testimony to Germany's ineptitude in international affairs. Many people indeed accepted the view that sooner or later there would be war in Europe.

Nevertheless we should not assume that a major war was indeed inevitable. We misuse hindsight if – because we know that war occurred in 1914 – we assume that events were bound to take the course that they did. In addition, we do scant justice to the preceding decades if we see

them merely as a build-up to the Great War. France may have signed its alliance with Russia in 1894 and Britain may have been alienated from Germany by the naval race. But, as we shall see, relations between France, Britain and Germany were better in the first six months of 1914 than for many a long year. The First World War would not have come about – certainly not in the way that it did and at the precise time that it did – without the short-term factors, which are addressed in the next chapter.

Summary Diagram

Weltpolitik and European Tensions, 1890–1911

