

a) Germany

From 1815 until the Austro-Prussian war of 1866, 'Germany' had not been a single country but a geographical expression, a loose confederation of 39 states of very variable size. The two most powerful of these were Austria and Prussia, who were also major Powers in their own right. Prussia began to establish economic ascendancy over Austria from the 1830s by means of the *Zollverein*, a customs union from which Austria was excluded. Then Bismarck used what he called 'blood and iron' – i.e. warfare, against Denmark, ~~Prussia~~ ^{Austria} and finally France – to unify Germany. Hence he was able to control the process of unification and ensure that Prussia dominated the new state.

The German Empire of 1871 tended to be authoritarian and militaristic. Executive power (decision making) belonged to the Kaiser (Emperor) and the Chancellor (chief minister). The Chancellor and the other ministers were appointed by the Kaiser and could only be dismissed by him, not by the parliament (Reichstag). Hence the German system was very different from that of Great Britain. The Kaiser was also Supreme War Lord. Hence the military chiefs had direct access to him, bypassing the ministers. There was a Reichstag elected by universal suffrage, but this was unable to exercise much

control over the government. Even so, the Imperial Chancellor needed the agreement of the Reichstag in passing laws and voting taxation and had to make strenuous efforts to secure a pro-government majority.

From 1871 to 1890, Germany was dominated by Bismarck. The old Kaiser, William I, who was already 64 when he had become King of Prussia in 1861, trusted him on most issues and his prestige as the creator of a united Germany was enormous. Bismarck was also an extremely able politician and statesman. After his dismissal in 1890, lesser figures were in charge. Policy-making was shared between the new Kaiser Wilhelm II (see the Profile on page 76), the Chancellor and the foreign minister, as well as the military and naval chiefs.

Between 1871 and 1914, Germany became the greatest industrial power in Europe. Unification, by creating a single internal market with a common currency and system of weights and measures, contributed to rapid economic expansion. German industrialisation was characterised by the growth of heavy industry (iron and steel) and the emergence of new industries (including chemicals), as well as by rapid urbanisation.

This industrialisation was significant in several ways. By 1914 Germany had outstripped its European rivals (see the table on page 6), and was second in the world only to the United States. The growth of the German economy intensified the competition amongst industrial states for markets and raw materials. This, combined with population growth, increased the pressure for overseas colonies. Within Germany, it generated considerable social tension, as the working and middle classes challenged the dominance of the traditional land-owning Prussian aristocracy (Junkers). How might the government defuse these tensions? Constitutional reform – giving power to middle-class or working-class political parties – was refused outright. But perhaps foreign policy might distract attention from internal problems. In the Bismarckian decades, it is said, colonial policy was to serve this purpose – hence the term 'social imperialism'. Under Wilhelm II, overseas policy in general (*Weltpolitik*) was used for the same ends.

Many feared that the newly unified Germany would seek to translate its economic power into dominance over other states. In fact Bismarck regarded Germany as a 'satisfied' Power, and yet he needed the prestige from success in international affairs to bolster his position at home. Would he – and his successors – seek to follow the traditional Prussian policy of co-operation with the conservative powers of Austria-Hungary and Russia, or might he seek an alliance with Great Britain? Would the 'Anglo-Saxon' nations of Germany and Britain be partners or rivals? Certainly it was on Germany, geographically midway between the other Great Powers in Europe, that would fall a good deal of the responsibility for producing peace or war.

Source: Lowe & Pearce 2001

b) France

French power in Europe had been at its height under Napoleon, when France was the wealthiest and, barring Russia, the most populous nation on the continent. For many years after his defeat in 1815, France continued to be regarded as a threat to peace. Partly this was due to her reputation as a military nation, partly to her reputation as the home of revolutionary ideas, a view that was reinforced by the revolutions of 1830 and 1848, which spread from France to other parts of Europe. Yet from 1815 to 1852 France pursued a largely peaceful foreign policy. The real challenge to the existing European order came with the reign of Napoleon III (nephew of the great Napoleon) from 1852 to 1870.

During this period, France – in the 'Crimean Coalition' with Britain – defeated Russia in 1854. French armies also fought in north Italy in 1859 in the 'war of liberation', directed against Austria – a sign of Louis Napoleon's sympathy for the cause of 'nationality'. The same support for nationalism led France to stay neutral when Prussia fought Austria in 1866, enabling Prussia to unite the north German states. Yet in 1870–71 France paid the price for Napoleon's miscalculation in fostering the growth of Prussian power.

France made a rapid recovery from her defeat in the early 1870s. She paid off the indemnity demanded by the Treaty of Frankfurt within a few years and regained her status as a Great Power. Her reorganised army, now based on compulsory military service, came to be regarded as an effective military force. She also developed a fairly powerful navy.

Yet while the Franco-Prussian war had been regarded as a war between equals, in 1914 there were great differences between the two states in both population and industrial strength. France's industrialisation was slower, more spasmodic and less complete than Germany's. This showed most obviously in output of coal and iron and steel, but also in the higher proportion of her population still engaged in farming. The French rate of population increase was much less than Germany's and lower than that of all the other Great Powers. Nevertheless, France remained a very wealthy country. Vast amounts of capital were invested abroad, especially in Russia.

Politically, the contrast between France and Germany was also striking. The Third Republic was undoubtedly democratic, but executive power was weak. Governments were usually short-lived, and this made it difficult to maintain a consistent foreign policy. It also meant that governments had trouble keeping control over enthusiasts for imperial expansion.

France was a very divided society. By 1900 the French Left (Socialists and Radicals) was largely pacifist and anti-militarist in outlook. On the other hand, a vocal section of the French Right had become very nationalistic and committed to *revanche* (revenge, against Germany for defeat in 1871 and the loss of Alsace-Lorraine). The influence of the idea of *revanche* on the policies of French governments can easily be exaggerated. Nevertheless, it persisted as an ideal – something that should not be forgotten – for many Frenchmen.

In the 1870s French foreign policy reverted to the tradition of the liberal alliance with Britain. In the following decade, however, colonial rivalries soured Anglo-French relations, especially in Africa. France herself became a great imperial power in this period with extensive colonial possessions in Africa and Asia. Hence the French republic turned to the monarchical state of Russia. An alliance with Russia, completed in 1894, became the keystone of French foreign policy and her guarantee of security against an increasingly powerful Germany. In practice, however, the alliance seemed to be anti-British in its direction until 1904, when France reached a colonial agreement with Britain. This began as merely a friendly relationship (*Entente Cordiale*), but demonstrations of German hostility towards France between 1905 and 1911 gradually converted it, by 1914, into something approaching a military alliance between France and Britain.

Source: Lowe & Pearce 2001

c) Great Britain

Britain was one of the leading Great Powers in 1815, having contributed substantially to the defeat of Napoleon; and for the next half-century Britain continued to play a prominent role in international affairs, participating in diplomatic conferences (the 'Concert of Europe') through which the Powers tried to resolve major problems by negotiation rather than war.

A major influence on British foreign policy was suspicion of Russia's designs on Constantinople, the capital of the Ottoman Empire, and possibly on Britain's possessions in India. It was feared that if Russia occupied Constantinople, she would be able to dominate the Near East. British ministers therefore supported the declining Ottoman Empire as a buffer against Russian expansion. The Crimean War of 1854-56 was fought mainly to check Russian influence over Turkey. But Britain became disillusioned, having made heavy sacrifices for meagre results, and turned against active involvement in European conflicts. This mood, combined with suspicion of Napoleon III's motives, largely explains why Britain was mainly a passive spectator of Bismarck's three wars in the 1860s.

The recovery of world trade in the 1850s also tended to divert British attention away from Europe towards more distant parts of the world. As the 'first industrial nation', Britain enjoyed many advantages over her continental rivals for several decades, enabling her to expand her trade worldwide.

Between 1870 and 1914, Britain became the greatest imperial power in the world. With colonial possessions scattered across the globe, hers was 'the empire on which the sun never set'. She was losing her pre-eminence as a manufacturing nation, being overtaken by the USA and Germany, but still relied on imported food and raw materials and on overseas markets for the sale of her manufactured goods. The nation's lifeblood was the uninterrupted flow of seaborne trade, and therefore Britain needed to 'rule the waves' and to defend the sea lanes with her navy. Fears that her fleet was inadequate for the country's needs led to the Naval Defence Act of 1889, which established the principle of the 'Two Power Standard': the Royal Navy was to be as large as the combined fleets of the next two naval powers. It came as a shock to Britons when, from 1898, Germany began to construct a large fleet. The army played a far less conspicuous role, and Britain was the only European Power that did not introduce conscription after 1871.

Britain had a well-established parliamentary system of government, which was democratised by stages in the nineteenth century. The monarch reigned but did not rule; and the aristocracy, though still having a very prominent role, shared power and influence with the prosperous middle class. This was a more 'open' society than in Germany, in which people of ability could rise to the top. One important difference between the two systems was the simple fact that in Britain the government of the day had to command a majority in parliament (especially in the House of Commons) to continue in office. Governments therefore took careful note of the views of MPs as well as of the press, and so were, to some extent, more responsive to the needs of the public.

British foreign policy naturally reflected, in part, her interests as a commercial and imperial nation. Immense importance was attached to safeguarding the routes to India, so that the Suez canal and southern Africa were regarded as areas of strategic concern. The defence of India itself, threatened by Russia's expansion into Central Asia, was also a major anxiety. Since the navy was incapable of sailing up the Khyber Pass, the retort to a Russian threat to India was to consider sending a fleet into the Black Sea, to threaten Russia's vulnerable southern coastline.

Traditionally, Britain also had been concerned to prevent any one Power from dominating the European continent, but from the mid-1860s to about 1900 the balance of power in Europe was not an important influence on British policy. This was the period of so-called 'Splendid Isolation', when Britain stood aside from alliances on the continent. Nevertheless, Britain continued to be involved in European affairs, especially those relating to the Ottoman Empire and the Straits - the strategic waterway linking the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. By the turn of the century, however, many British statesmen were becoming convinced that Britain's resources were overstretched and that she needed allies if she were to maintain her role as a world power.

Source: Lowe & Pears, 1961

d) Austria-Hungary

From 1815 to 1848, the Austrian Chancellor, Metternich, had exercised great influence in Europe, working closely with Russia and Prussia in an informal conservative alliance opposed to revolutionary movements. After this period, however, important changes occurred which lessened Austria's power and prestige. Economically, she declined relative to the other Great Powers. Indeed her economic progress was dwarfed by that of other countries. In foreign policy she gave diplomatic support, in 1854, to Britain and France in the Crimean War, thus alienating her former ally Russia. Then she suffered defeats in wars of national unification, in north Italy in 1859 and against Prussia in 1866. She was becoming increasingly unable to play a fully independent role in international affairs.

Austria was in some ways an anachronism: in an age of growing nationalism (when each separate national group demanded its own nation state), she was the property of the Habsburg dynasty and contained many different national groups. In 1867 an important change occurred. The Habsburgs compromised with the Hungarians (or Magyars) by granting them self-government. 'Austria' became 'Austria-Hungary', sometimes called the 'Dual Monarchy': Austria had its capital at Vienna, and Hungary its own government and parliament at Budapest. There was to be a common foreign policy and a uniform army, but in most other matters the two states were separate.

There were now two 'master races' in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Germans in the West and the Magyars in the East. But there were also numerous other races: Czechs, Slovaks, Poles, Italians, Serbs, Croats and others. These were 'subject races', and they were discriminated against by the Germans and Magyars. The scale of the problem can be seen from the fact that mobilisation posters had to be printed in 15 separate languages! The Emperor, Franz Joseph, was popular and well-intentioned, but conflicts between the nationalities were endless. Concessions to one group only provoked protests or riots by another. In Hungary, the dominant Magyars ignored the claims of 'inferior' peoples and so alienated the traditionally loyal Croats, as well as the Serbs. The result was a Serbo-Croat alliance within Austria-Hungary that looked beyond the borders of the state to the independent Balkan kingdom of Serbia as a means of escape from Magyar oppression. The 'south Slav' problem, as it was called, soon threatened Austria-Hungary with disintegration.

By 1871, the Austro-Hungarian government regarded the Balkans as a vital sphere of political influence and economic activity. This raised the problem of whether to oppose Russia or co-operate with her in Balkan issues. In 1871 Austria-Hungary hoped for an anti-Russian alliance with Germany, but this conflicted with Bismarck's desire for good relations with Russia. In order to check Russian influence, therefore, Austrian policy was directed towards creating client states in the Balkans and propping up the imperial power there, the Ottoman Empire. Co-operation with Britain in the area was another option, and this served Austria-Hungary well for a time. Yet the growth of nationalism in the Balkan states, particularly after 1900, raised serious problems. The most serious threat came from the independent Balkan state of Serbia, especially since Serbia was backed by Russia.

Source: Lowe & Pinner 2001

e) Russia

Tsarist Russia was a powerful force in European affairs in the first half of the nineteenth century. Her aim was to defend monarchical authority. After the upheavals of 1848, the Tsarist regime – the only sizeable continental state impervious to the revolutionary fever – was again determined to act as a stabilising, conservative force.

Then came defeat in the Crimean War of 1854–56, a shattering blow to Russian prestige. It was a source of deep humiliation to the Tsar that Russia was now forbidden to maintain a navy in the Black Sea or to garrison a naval base on its shores. Internally, it inspired an attempt to modernise local government, the army and educational system, and brought about the abolition of serfdom in 1861. The effect on Russian foreign policy was equally dramatic. From being the defender of the existing state of affairs (the *status quo*), Russia became a 'revisionist' Power. She repaid Austria's 'treachery' in siding with the western powers in 1854 by remaining neutral when Napoleon III, and later Bismarck, fought the Austrian Empire in 1859 and 1866. In 1870, during the Franco-Prussian war, the Tsar insisted that he would not be bound by the hated 'Black Sea clauses'.

Russia was both a European and an Asiatic power. Enormous in extent, with a population (in European Russia alone) equal to that of Germany and Austria-Hungary combined, Russia was making great strides towards overcoming her backwardness compared with the other Great Powers. Rapid industrialisation in the 1890s yielded the highest annual rate of increase in industrial production in the world and produced an impressive expansion of heavy industry and of the railway network. Russia was acquiring many of the trappings of a modern state.

Yet Russia was a colossus with feet of clay, as her defeat by Japan in the war of 1904–5 was to demonstrate. A number of serious weaknesses prevented her from realising her full potential as a Great Power.

Firstly, the Russian economy did not generate enough taxable wealth to meet the increasing needs of the state. Russian agriculture remained generally unproductive but grain from the richer regions had to be exported to pay for imported machinery for her industries. Industrialisation was also partly financed by massive foreign loans, which increased the size of the state debt. If the peacetime army and navy was a heavy burden on the treasury, war itself was a luxury Russia could not afford. The war with Japan virtually bankrupted the state.

Secondly, the persistence of widespread social and political discontent weakened the fabric of the state. Finally, the government was incompetent. The Tsars clung to their autocratic powers, insisting on their divine mission, but they were quite incapable of ruling effectively. When a parliament, the *Duma*, was eventually permitted in 1905, it had little power to influence the government. On top of this, the Russian bureaucracy was notoriously corrupt and incompetent. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Russia was not the great military Power that her size and resources suggested. Nor was it a coincidence that defeat was followed by revolution in 1905.

The formation of a united Germany in 1871, altering the political situation in Central Europe and creating a powerful neighbour on her western frontier, caused Russia considerable concern. In the Bismarck era (1871–90), Russia was content to work in association or alliance with Germany. The non-renewal of the alliance after Bismarck's fall led to an alliance with France, as a guarantee of security, though it was not always a close or harmonious alliance.

Russian policy towards the Ottoman Empire was a curious mixture of practical politics and romanticism. Control of the Straits, linking the Black Sea with the Mediterranean, was vital for Russian trade and her status as a European Power. The idea of recovering Constantinople from the Turks, on the other hand, was a dream that had excited the Russian imagination for over a century. However impracticable, the idea still influenced Russian policy at various times.

The official policy, pursued by the foreign ministry, was a cautious one, recognising that the 'Eastern Question' was a matter of concern

to all the Great Powers. Russia would simply try to exploit favourable situations to secure advantages for herself or her client states in the Balkans. 'Pan-Slavists', however, accepted no such restraints. They believed in the solidarity of all Slavs, whether in Russia itself or the Balkans. To them, Russia's mission was to liberate the Balkan Christians from Turkish oppression; and they wished to create independent Slav states under the protection of Mother Russia and the Orthodox Church.

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Source: Lowe & Paine 2007