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‘A Feeling that Events are in the Air’

1 CHANGE AND DECAY

One day in 1895, a young British army officer lunched in London with the old statesman Sir William Harcourt. After a conversation in which the guest took, by his own account, none too modest a share, Lt. Winston Churchill – for it was he – asked Harcourt eagerly, ‘What will happen then?’ His host replied with inimitably Victorian complacency: ‘My dear Winston, the experiences of a long life have convinced me that nothing ever happens.’ Sepia-tinted photographs exercise a fascination for modern generations, enhanced by the serenity which long plate exposures imposed upon their subjects. We cherish images of old Europe during the last years before war: aristocrats attired in coronets and ball gowns, white ties and tails; Balkan peasants in pantaloons and fezzes; haughty, doomed royal family groups.

Young men with moustaches, smoking pipes, clad in the inevitable straw hats, poling punts occupied by reclining girls with bobbed hair and high collars, suggest an idyll before the storm. In polite circles even language was tightly corseted: the words ‘damn’ and ‘bloody’ were impermissible, and more extreme epithets were unusual between men and women save in the most intimate circumstances. ‘Decent’ was an adjective of high praise, ‘rotter’ a noun of profound condemnation. Fifty years later British writer and war veteran Reginald Pound asserted: ‘The sardonic objectivity of our latter-day school of historians can neither penetrate nor dissipate the golden haze of that singular time. For all its rampant injustices, its soaring unearned incomes, its abounding wretchedness, its drunkenness galore, the people knew a kind of untainted happiness that has since gone from the world.’

Yet even though Pound was there and we were not, it is hard to accept his view. Only a man or woman who chose to be blind to the

extraordinary happenings in the world could suppose the early years of the twentieth century an era of tranquillity, still less contentment. Rather, they hosted a ferment of passions and frustrations, scientific and industrial novelties, irreconcilable political ambitions, which caused many of the era's principals to recognise that the old order could not hold. To be sure, dukes were still attended by footmen wearing white hair-powder; smart households were accustomed to eat dinners of ten or twelve courses; on the continent duelling was not quite extinct. But it was plain that these things were coming to an end, that the future would be arbitrated by the will of the masses or those skilled in manipulating it, not by the whims of the traditional ruling caste, even if those who held power strove to postpone the deluge.

It is a conceit of our own times to suppose that we are obliged to live, and national leaderships to make decisions, amid unprecedentedly rapid change. Yet between 1900 and 1914, technological, social and political advances swept Europe and America on a scale unknown in any such previous timespan, the blink of an eye in human experience. Einstein promulgated his special theory of relativity. Marie Curie isolated radium and Leo Baekeland invented Bakelite, the first synthetic polymer. Telephones, gramophones, motor vehicles, cinema performances and electrified homes became commonplace among affluent people in the world's richer societies. Mass-circulation newspapers soared to unprecedented social influence and political power.

In 1903 man first achieved powered flight; five years later, Ferdinand Count Zeppelin lyricised the mission to secure unrestricted passage across the skies, an increasingly plausible prospect: 'Only therewith can the divine ancient command be fulfilled ... [that] creation should be subjugated by mankind.' At sea, following the 1906 launch of the Royal Navy's *Dreadnought*, all capital ships lacking its heavy ordnance mounted in power-driven turrets became obsolete, unfit to join a fleet line of battle. The range at which squadrons expected to exchange fire, a few thousand yards when admirals were cadets, now stretched to tens of miles. Submarines were recognised as potent weapons. Ashore, while the American Civil War and not the First World War was the first great conflict of the industrial age, in the interval between the two the technology of destruction made dramatic advances: machine-guns achieved reliability and efficiency, artillery increased its killing power. It was realised that barbed wire could be employed to check the movements of soldiers as effectively as those of beasts. Much speculation about the future character

of war was nonetheless mistaken. An anonymous 1908 article in the German publication *Militär-Wochenblatt* asserted that the 1904–05 Russo-Japanese experience in Manchuria 'proved that even well-defended fortifications and entrenchments can be taken, even across open ground, by courage and cunning exploitation of terrain ... The concept of states waging war to the point of absolute exhaustion is beyond the European cultural experience.'

Socialism became a major force in every continental state, while Liberalism entered historic decline. The revolt of women against statutory subjection emerged as a significant issue, especially in Britain. Across Europe real wages rose almost 50 per cent between 1890 and 1912, child mortality declined and nutrition greatly improved. But despite such advances – or, in accordance with de Tocqueville's view that misery becomes less acceptable when no longer absolute, because of them – tens of millions of workers recoiled from the inequalities of society. Industries in Russia, France, Germany and Britain were convulsed by strikes, sometimes violent, which spread alarm and even terror among the ruling classes. In 1905 Russia experienced its first major revolution. Germany displaced France and Russia as the British Empire's most plausible enemy. Britain, which had been the world's first industrialised nation, saw its share of global manufacturing fall from one-third in 1870 to one-seventh in 1913.

All this took place within a similar modest timescale to that dividing us today from the 2001 terrorist assaults on the United States. Social historian and politician Charles Masterman mused in 1909 about his uncertainty 'whether civilization is about to blossom into flowers, or wither in a tangle of dead leaves and faded gold ... whether we are about to plunge into a new period of tumult and upheaval or whether a door is to be suddenly opened, revealing unimaginable glories'. Austrian writer Carl von Lang wrote early in 1914: 'There is a feeling that events are in the air; all that is unpredictable is their timing. Perhaps we shall see several more years of peace, but it is equally possible that overnight some tremendous upheaval will happen.'

It is unsurprising that the wing-collared statesmen of Europe found it difficult to adjust their thinking and conduct to the new age into which they were so abruptly thrust, to the acceleration of communication which transformed human affairs, and to an increase of military destructive power which few understood. Horse-and-carriage diplomacy, like governance by crowned heads selected by accident of birth, proved wholly inadequate to address a crisis of the electric age. Winston Churchill wrote in

1930: 'Scarcely anything material or established which I was brought up to believe was permanent or vital has lasted. Everything I was sure or taught to be sure was impossible, has happened.'

Between 1815 and 1870 Russia, Prussia, Austria and France carried about equal weight on the world stage, behind Britain. Thereafter the new Germany powered ahead, becoming recognised as by far the most successful continental nation, world leader in almost every industrial sphere from pharmaceuticals to automobile technology, and a social pioneer in promoting health insurance and old-age pensions. Some British jingos allowed the vastness of their empire to delude them about the primacy of their own little country, but economists coolly measured its eclipse by America and Germany as both manufacturer and trader, with France ranking fourth. All the major nations acknowledged as a proper ambition the maximisation of their own greatness and territorial possessions. Only Britain and France favoured maintenance of the status quo abroad, because their own imperial ambitions were sated.

Others chafed. In May 1912 Lt. Col. Alick Russell, the British military attaché in Berlin, expressed concern about the febrile mood he identified. There was, he thought, 'an uncomfortable feeling in German hearts that the army of the Fatherland is gaining a reputation for being unwilling to fight, an intense irritation at what is considered French arrogance and the apparently inevitable hostility of ourselves'. Put together, he suggested, 'we obtain a sum of national sentiment, which might on occasion turn the scale, when the issue of peace or war was hanging in the balance'. Russell's concern about German volatility, sometimes trending towards hysteria, was reflected in all his dispatches, and increased during the two years that followed.

Contrary to the belief of their neighbours, however, many German people had no enthusiasm for war. The country was approaching a constitutional crisis. The Social Democratic Party which dominated the Reichstag – the German socialist movement was the largest in the world – was deeply hostile to militarism. Early in 1914, the British naval attaché reported with some surprise that Reichstag navy debates were sparsely attended; only between twenty and fifty members turned up, who gossiped incessantly during speeches. The industrial working class was profoundly alienated from a government composed of conservative ministers appointed for their personal acceptability to the Kaiser.

But Germany, if no longer an absolutist state on the Russian model, remained more of a militarised autocracy than a democracy. Its most powerful institution was the army, and its crowned head loved to surround

himself with soldiers. On 18 October 1913, Kaiser Wilhelm II decreed large-scale celebrations for the centenary of the victory at Leipzig, the 'Battle of the Nations' against Bonaparte. Following royal example, German department stores surrendered generous floorspace to commemorative dioramas. The marketplace was lavishly endowed with militaristically-tinted products. A harmonica named '*Wandervogel*', in honour of an Austro-German youth hiking movement of that name, was sold in a military postal service box. A best-selling harp was inscribed with the words: '*Durch Kampf zum Sieg*' – 'Through Battle to Victory'. Gertrud Schädla, a twenty-seven-year-old teacher living in a small town near Bremen, described in her May 1914 diary a fund-raising event for the Red Cross: 'I am quite interested in this – how could I not be, having three brothers liable to military call-up? More than that, I have recognised the critical nature of its work since I read a life of Florence Nightingale, and because I know from Paul Rohrbach's interesting book *German World Policies* how grave and how constant is the threat of war facing us.'

Wilhelm II presided over an empire unified only in his lifetime, which had achieved immense economic strength, but remained prey to insecurities which its ruler personified. He had no real thirst for blood, but a taste for panoply and posturing, a craving for martial success; he displayed many of the characteristics of a uniformed version of Kenneth Grahame's Mr Toad. Visitors remarked the notably homoerotic atmosphere at court, where the Kaiser greeted male intimates such as the Duke of Württemberg with a kiss on the lips. In the first decade of the century, the court and army were convulsed by a series of homosexual scandals almost as traumatic as was the Dreyfus Affair for France. In 1908, Dietrich Graf von Hülsen-Haeseler, chief of the Kaiser's military secretariat, died of a heart attack while performing an after-dinner *pas seul* dressed in a ballet tutu before a Black Forest shooting-lodge audience which included the Emperor himself.

And while Wilhelm's intimate circle displayed a taste for the grotesque, he himself pursued enthusiasms with tireless lack of judgement; most of his contemporaries, including the statesmen of Europe, thought him mildly unhinged, and this was probably clinically the case. Christopher Clark has written: 'He was an extreme exemplar of that Edwardian social category, the club bore who is forever explaining some pet project to the man in the next chair. Small wonder that the prospect of being button-holed by the Kaiser over lunch or dinner, when escape was impossible, struck fear into the hearts of so many European royals.' Rear-Admiral

Albert Hopman, a shrewd and iconoclastic naval officer, wrote of the Kaiser in May 1914: ‘He is vanity itself, sacrificing everything to his own moods and childish amusements, and nobody checks him in doing so. I ask myself how people with blood rather than water in their veins can bear to be around him.’ Hopman described to his diary a strange dream on the night of 18 June 1914: ‘I stood in front of a castle ... There I saw the old, broken-down Kaiser Wilhelm [I], talking to some people while holding a sabre stuck in its scabbard. I walked towards him, supported him, and led him into the castle. As I did so he said to me: “You must draw the sword ... My grandson [Wilhelm II] is too feeble [to do so].”’

All Europe’s monarchs were wild cards in the doom game played out in 1914, but Wilhelm was the wildest of all. Bismarck’s legacy to his country was a dysfunctional polity in which the will of the German people, expressed in the composition of the Reichstag, was trumped by the powers of the Emperor, his appointed ministers and the army’s chief of staff. Jonathan Steinberg describes the era inaugurated by Wilhelm’s dismissal of his chancellor in 1890, soon after assuming the throne: ‘Bismarck ... left a system which only he – a very abnormal person – could govern and then only if he had as superior a normal Kaiser. [Thereafter] neither condition obtained, and the system slithered into the sycophancy, intrigue and bluster that made the Kaiser’s Germany a danger to its neighbours.’ Max Weber, who was born into that era, wrote similarly of Bismarck: ‘He left a nation *totally without political education ... totally bereft of political will*. It had grown accustomed *to submit patiently* and fatalistically to whatever was decided for it in the name of monarchical government.’* Democratic influence was strongest on domestic financial matters, weakest on foreign policy, which was deeply secretive, conducted by ministers who were the Kaiser’s personal appointees, heedless of the balance of representation in the Reichstag, with variable but critical influence from the army.

The Hohenzollerns got everything wrong socially. The Crown Prince returned from a 1913 fox-hunting tour of England convinced – quite mistakenly – of Germany’s popularity with that country’s ruling class. His father, with his withered arm and obsession with the minutiae of military uniforms and regulations, was a brittle personality whose yearning for respect caused him to intersperse blandishments and threats in ill-judged succession. Wilhelm once demanded of the imperialist Cecil Rhodes:

* Emphases in original.

'Now tell me, Rhodes, why is it that I am not popular in England? What can I do to make myself popular?' Rhodes answered: 'Suppose you just try doing nothing.' The Kaiser hesitated, then exploded into heavy laughter. It was beyond his powers to heed such advice. In 1908 Wilhelm scrawled a marginal note on a dispatch from his ambassador in London: 'If they want a war, they may start it, we are not afraid of it!'

In the years before 1914 European allegiances were not set in stone: they wavered, flickered, shifted. The French entered the new century with a possible invasion of England docketed in their war scenarios, and in 1905 the British still had contingency plans to fight France. They believed for a time that Russia might abandon the Triple Entente and join the Triple Alliance. In 1912 Austria's Count Berchtold indeed dallied with a rapprochement with St Petersburg, though this foundered over irreconcilable differences about the Balkans. The following year, Germany offered loans to Serbia. Many of the first generation of Rhodes Scholars at Oxford were young Germans, whose presence reflected British respect, even reverence, for their nation's culture. And industry: until 1911, Vickers collaborated with Krupp on the design and manufacture of shell fuses.

Though the Anglo-German 'naval race' grievously impaired bilateral relations, Chancellor Theobald Bethmann Hollweg and Lord Chancellor Richard Haldane made fumbling efforts to improve them, the former by seeking an assurance of British neutrality in the event of a continental war. Bethmann paid a domestic price for such advances, becoming mistrusted by fanatical German nationalists as an alleged anglophile. Meanwhile the Kaiser's brother Prince Heinrich of Prussia, during a January 1914 conversation in Berlin with British naval attaché Captain Wilfred Henderson, remarked in idiosyncratic English readily comprehensible at any London dining table, that 'other large European maritime nations are not white men'. This comment, which placed alike beyond the pale Russians, Italians, Austro-Hungarians and Frenchmen, won Henderson's warm approbation. Reporting the royal remarks to the Admiralty, he wrote: 'I could not help feeling that His Royal Highness had voiced in a peculiarly British way a view that is very prevalent in our own Service.'

These words were thought sufficiently embarrassing to be expunged from a volume of such diplomatic reports published a generation later. But the Prince's theme was pursued on an evening when German and British naval officers dined together, and the only toast offered was that of 'the two white nations'. At the 1914 Kiel Regatta, some German sailors

swore eternal friendship to their visiting counterparts of the Royal Navy. The commander of *Pommern* told officers of the cruiser *Southampton*: 'We try and mould ourselves in the traditions of your navy, and when I see in the papers that the possibility of war between our two nations must be considered, I read it with horror – to us such a war would be a civil war.' Grand-Admiral Tirpitz employed an English governess for his daughters, who completed their education at Cheltenham Ladies' College.

Yet if Germany admired Britain, it also sought to challenge her, most conspicuously through the creation of a fleet capable of engaging the Royal Navy – this was overwhelmingly the Kaiser's personal commitment, strongly opposed by the chancellor and the army – and more fundamentally by rejecting the continental balance of power, so dear to British hearts. At Kiel in 1914, Vice-Admiral Sir George Warrender sought to flatter Tirpitz. The Englishman said: 'You are the most famous man in Europe.' Tirpitz answered: 'I have never heard that before.' Warrender added: 'At least in England.' The admiral growled: 'You in England always think that I am the bogey of England.' So Tirpitz was, and so too was the Kaiser. However Germany dressed matters up, its leaders aspired to secure a dominance in the management of Europe which no British government would concede, and thereafter they proposed to reach out across the oceans of the world.

Lord Haldane told Prince Lichnowsky, in the German ambassador's words: 'England, if we attacked France, would unconditionally spring to France's aid, for England could not allow the balance of power to be disturbed.' Lichnowsky was not taken seriously in Berlin, partly because of his enthusiasm for things English. His hosts did not reciprocate. British prime minister Herbert Asquith wrote of the Lichnowskys to his confidante Venetia Stanley: 'rather trying guests. They have neither of them any manners, and he is loquacious and inquisitive about trifles.'

Haldane's warning, transmitted to Berlin by the ambassador, was contemptuously dismissed. Gen. Helmuth von Moltke, Germany's chief of staff, thought the British Army an imperial gendarmerie of little consequence, and the Royal Navy irrelevant in a continental clash of soldiers. The Kaiser scrawled on the ambassador's report his own view that the British concept of a balance of power was an 'idiocy' which would make England 'eternally into our enemy'. He wrote to Franz Ferdinand of Austria, describing Haldane's remarks as 'full of poison and hatred and envy of the good development of our mutual alliance and our two countries [Germany and Austria]'. Several British academics warned of the

prevalence of opinion in German universities about the inevitability of a historic struggle between the Kaiser's people and their own, identified as ascendant Rome and doomed Carthage.

Germany and the Dual Monarchy of Austria-Hungary were twin pillars of the Triple Alliance, of which Italy was a third member, upon whose attendance in the event of war nobody relied. For much of the previous century, the Ottoman Empire had been known as 'the sick man of Europe', its might and territories shrivelling. It had now been supplanted in that predicament by the Hapsburg Empire, whose dissolution in the face of its own contradictions and disaffected minorities was a focus of constant speculation in chancelleries and newspapers, not least in Germany. But the rulers of the Hohenzollern Empire elevated preservation of their tottering ally to a key objective of foreign policy. The Kaiser and his advisers shackled themselves to the Hapsburgs, not least because the beneficiaries of Austria-Hungary's dissolution would be their chosen enemies: Russia and its Balkan clients. The Kaiser delivered frequent denunciations of 'Slavdom' and Russia's alleged leadership of a front against 'Germandom'. On 10 December 1912 he told the Swiss ambassador in Berlin: 'we will not leave Austria in the lurch: if diplomacy fails we shall have to fight this racial war'.

The Hapsburg Empire embraced fifty million people of eleven nationalities, occupying the territories of modern Austria, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, parts of Poland and north-east Italy. Franz Joseph was a weary old man of eighty-three, who had occupied his throne since 1848, and created the Dual Monarchy in 1867. For twenty-eight years he had enjoyed an intimacy with the actress Katharina Schrott. He wrote to her as 'My Dear Good Friend'; she replied to 'Your Imperial and Royal Majesty, my Most August Lord'. She was sixty-one in 1914, and they had long since settled into a pleasant domesticity. At Ischl, his summer residence, the Emperor rambled alone to her house, Villa Felicitas, where he would sometimes arrive at 7 a.m. after sending a note: 'Please leave the small door unlocked.'

Having spent some years of his youth as a soldier, even seeing a little action, the Emperor almost invariably affected military uniform; he perceived his army as the unifying force of the empire. Its officer corps was dominated by noblemen, most of whom combined conceit with incompetence. Franz Joseph's reign was symbolised by his insistence, when a young monarch, upon holding military exercises on a parade ground sheeted in ice, which caused many horses to slip and fall, killing two of their riders. On a larger scale, this was how he continued to rule, seeking

to defy inexorable social, political and economic forces. Norman Stone has categorised the Hapsburg monarchy as 'a system of institutionalised escapism'. Its capital harboured as much poverty and unemployment as any European city, and more despair than most: in 1913 almost 1,500 Viennese attempted suicide, and more than half succeeded. As for popular consent, one writer has observed of the Austrian parliament: 'It was less a legislature than a cacophony. But since it was a Viennese cacophony, it shrilled and jangled with a certain flair.' In March 1914 the racket grew too loud for Franz Joseph: he prorogued the Reichsrat in the face of relentless clashes between its Czech and German members. He and his ministers thereafter ruled by decree.

Austria-Hungary was a predominantly rural society, but Vienna was toasted as one of the most cultured and cosmopolitan capitals on earth, beloved of Franz Lehár and Thomas Mann. Lenin thought it 'a mighty, beautiful and vivacious city'. Irving Berlin's 'Alexander's Ragtime Band' was sung there in English, and in 1913 it played host to the world premiere of Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*. It is an oddity of history that in the same year Stalin, Trotsky, Tito and Hitler alike lived for some months in Vienna. The great American boxer Jack Johnson was star turn of that winter's season at the Apollo Theatre. Among a host of popular cafés, the Landtmann was the favourite of Sigmund Freud. The city represented a global pinnacle of snobbery: bowing, scraping and even hand-kissing shopkeepers flattered their middle-class customers by adding an aristocratic 'von' to their names, and addressing them as 'Your Grace'. Domestic servants were subject to almost feudal routines: employment law entitled housemaids to only seven hours off a fortnight, every alternate Sunday. Aristocratic Viennese had a New Year custom of pouring gobbets of molten lead into buckets of iced champagne, then trying to predict the future by the shapes into which they hardened.

Austrian aristocratic social life was the most ritualised in Europe, dominated by appearances in the boxes of the Parquet Circle at the Court Theatre and Court Opera, and weekly At Homes. Every smart Viennese knew that Sunday was the afternoon of Princess Croy; Monday, of Countess Haugwitz; Tuesday, Countess Berchtold; Wednesday, Countess Buquoy. Countess Sternberg organised weekend ski outings at the Semmering Alp; Countess Larisch presided at bridge parties; Pauline, Princess Metternich, was alleged to entertain so many Jewish bankers that she received sneers as '*Notre Dame de Zion*'. Vienna boasted one of the largest and most influential Jewish communities in Europe, and formidable anti-Semitism to go with it.

Though the Germans condescended politically and militarily to the Austrians, they were prone to spasms of social inadequacy when meeting Hapsburg grandees on their home turf. Wickham Steed, the long-serving *Times* correspondent, wrote of Vienna: 'The combination of stateliness and homeliness, of colour and light, the comparative absence of architectural monstrosities and the Italian influence everywhere apparent, contribute, together with the grace and beauty of the women, the polite friendliness of the inhabitants and the broad, warm accent of their speech, to charm the eye and ear of every travelled visitor.' But Steed found Viennese vanity 'insufferable'; he perceived 'a general atmosphere of unreality', and complained that the city lacked a soul.

The Austrians cultivated relationships with Germany, Turkey and Greece in efforts to frustrate Serbian ambitions to create a pan-Slav state, a Yugoslavia, embracing several million Hapsburg subjects. In the years before 1914, the Empire also grew accustomed to employing military threats as a routine extension of its diplomacy. Its generals regarded war with reckless insouciance, as a mere tool for the advancement of national interests rather than as a passport to Hades. As Hapsburg minorities became ever more alienated, imperial repression became increasingly heavy-handed. Vienna fostered divisions between its subject Muslims, Serbs and Croats. Most minorities were denied political rights, while being liable to punitive taxation. Vienna might waltz, but there was little grace or mercy about anything else in Franz Joseph's dominions. The best that might be said was that its neighbours behaved no better.

The leaders of Russia shared with the Kaiser's court a belief that the two empires were fated to participate in a historic struggle between Germanism and Slavdom. Germans made no secret of their contempt for the Russians, and subjected them to constant snubs. Meanwhile the Tsar's subjects were resentful of German cultural and industrial superiority. The two nations' most conspicuous point of friction and threatened collision was Turkey. They circled the ailing Ottoman Empire as predators, each bent upon securing choice portions of its carcass. Control of the Dardanelles entrance to the Black Sea, through which 37 per cent of Russian exports passed, was an especially critical issue. Weak Ottoman supervision was just acceptable in St Petersburg. German dominance was not, yet this was a key objective of the Kaiser's foreign policy. The Young Turks who seized power in Constantinople in 1908 welcomed German aid, and especially military advisers, in their drive to modernise the country. As for Berlin's view,

when Gen. Liman von Sanders departed to command the Constantinople garrison in 1913, Wilhelm urged him: 'create for me a new strong army which obeys my orders.'

Liman's appointment to Turkey provoked consternation in St Petersburg. The president of the Duma urged Nicholas II to act boldly to wrest the Dardanelles from the Ottomans before the Germans did so: 'the Straits must become ours. A war will be joyfully welcomed, and will raise the government's prestige.' At a December 1913 Russian Council of Ministers meeting, the navy and war ministers were questioned about the readiness of their services to fight, and answered that 'Russia was perfectly prepared for a duel with Germany, not to speak of one with Austria.' The following February, Russian military intelligence passed to the government a German secret memorandum which shocked St Petersburg: it emphasised Berlin's commitment to controlling the Dardanelles, and to securing for the Kaiser's officers command of the straits' gun batteries. It seems extravagant to suggest, as do some historians, that the Russians wished to start a war in 1914 to gain the Black Sea approaches. But they were almost certainly willing to fight to stop the Germans getting them.

Russia boomed in the last years before Armageddon, to the dismay of its German and Austrian enemies. After 1917, its new Bolshevik rulers forged a myth of Tsarist industrial failure. In reality, the Russian economy had become the fourth largest in the world, growing at almost 10 per cent annually. The country's 1913 national income was almost as large as that of Britain, 171 per cent of France's, 83.5 per cent of Germany's, albeit distributed among a much larger population – the Tsar ruled two hundred million people to the Kaiser's sixty-five million. Russia had the largest agricultural production in Europe, growing as much grain as Britain, France and Germany combined. After several good harvests, the state's revenues were soaring. In 1910, European Russia had only one-tenth the railway density of Britain or Germany, but thereafter this increased rapidly, funded by French loans. Russian production of iron, steel, coal and cotton goods matched that of France, though still lagging far behind Germany's and Britain's.

Most Russians were conspicuously better off than they had been at the end of the previous century: per-capita incomes rose 56 per cent between 1898 and 1913. With an expansion of schools, literacy doubled in the same period, to something near 40 per cent, while infant mortality and the overall death rate fell steeply. There was a growing business class, though this had little influence on government, still dominated by the landowning

aristocracy. Russian high life exercised a fascination for Western Europeans. That genteel British magazine *The Lady* portrayed Nicholas II's empire in romantic and even gushing terms: 'this vast country with its great cities and arid steppes and extremes of riches and poverty, captures the imagination. Not a few Englishmen and Englishwomen have succumbed to its fascinations and made it their home, and English people, generally speaking, are liked and welcomed by Russians. One learns that the girls of the richer classes are brought up very carefully. They are kept under strict control in the nursery and the schoolroom, live a simple, healthy life, are well taught several languages including English and French ... with the result that they are well-educated, interesting, graceful, and have a pleasing, reposeful manner.'

It was certainly true that Europe's other royal and noble fraternities mingled on easy terms with their Russian counterparts, who were as much at home in Paris, Biarritz and London as in St Petersburg. But the Tsarist regime, and the supremely hedonistic aristocracy behind it, faced acute domestic tensions. Whatever the Hapsburg Empire's difficulties in managing its ethnic minorities, the Romanov Empire's were worse: enforced Russification, especially of language, was bitterly resisted in Finland, Poland, the Baltic states and Muslim regions of the Caucasus. Moreover Russia faced massive turmoil created by disaffected industrial workers. In 1910 the country suffered just 222 stoppages, all attributed by the police to economic rather than political factors. By 1913 this tally had swelled to 2,404 strikes, 1,034 of them branded as political; in the following year there were 3,534, of which 2,565 were deemed political. Baron Nikolai Wrangel observed presciently: 'We are on the verge of events, the like of which the world has not seen since the time of the barbarian invasions. Soon everything that constitutes our lives will strike the world as useless. A period of barbarism is about to begin and it will last for decades.'

Nicholas II was a sensitive man, more rational than the Kaiser if no more intelligent. Having seen the 1905 Russo-Japanese war – which Wilhelm incited him to fight – provoke a revolution at home, the Tsar understood that a general European conflict would be disastrous for most, if not all, of the participants. But he cherished a naïve faith in the common interests of the emperors' trade union, supposing that he and Wilhelm enjoyed a personal understanding, and were alike committed to peace. He was contradictorily influenced, however, by Russia's recent humiliations – in 1905 by Japan's forces, in 1908 by Austrian diplomacy when the

Hapsburgs summarily annexed Bosnia-Herzegovina. The latter especially rankled. In January 1914 the Tsar sternly declared to former French foreign minister Théophile Delcassé: 'We shall not let ourselves be trampled upon.'

A conscientious ruler, Nicholas saw all foreign dispatches and telegrams; many military intelligence reports bear his personal mark. But his imagination was limited: he existed in an almost divine seclusion from his people, served by ministers of varying degrees of incompetence, committed to sustaining authoritarian rule. An assured paternalist, on rural visits he was deluded about the monarchy's popularity by glimpses of cheering peasantry, with whom he never seriously engaged. He believed that revolutionary and even reformist sentiment was confined to Jews, students, landless peasants and some industrial workers. The Kaiser would not have dared to act as arbitrarily as did the Tsar in scorning the will of the people: when the Duma voted against funding four battleships for the Baltic Fleet, Nicholas shrugged and ordered that they should be built anyway. Even the views of the 215-member State Council, dominated by the nobility and landowners, carried limited weight.

If no European government displayed much cohesion in 1914, Nicholas II's administration was conspicuously ramshackle. Lord Lansdowne observed caustically of the ruler's weak character: 'the only way to deal with the Tsar is to be the last to leave his room'. Nicholas's most important political counsellor was Sergei Sazonov, the foreign minister. Fifty-three years old and a member of the minor nobility, he had travelled widely in Europe, serving in Russia's London embassy, where he developed a morbid suspiciousness about British designs. He had now led the foreign ministry for four years. His department – known for its location as the Choristers' Bridge, just as its French counterpart was the Quai d'Orsay – spoke scarcely at all to the Ministry of War or to its chief, Vladimir Sukhomlinov; meanwhile the latter knew almost nothing about international affairs.

Russian statesmen were divided between easterners and westerners. Some favoured a new emphasis on Russian Asia and exploitation of its mineral resources. The diplomat Baron Rosen urged the Tsar that his empire had no interests in Europe save its borders, and certainly none worth a war. But Rosen was mocked by other royal advisers as 'not a proper Russian'. Nicholas's personal respect and even sympathy for Germany caused him to direct most of his emotional hostility towards Austria-Hungary. Though not committed to pan-Slavism, he was

determined to assert the legitimacy of Russian influence in the Balkans. It remains a focus of keen dispute how far such an assumption was morally or politically justifiable.

Russia's intelligentsia as a matter of course detested and despised the imperial regime. Captain Langlois, a French expert on the Tsarist Empire, wrote in 1913 that 'Russian youth, unfortunately supported or even incited by its teachers, adopted anti-military and even anti-patriotic sentiments which we can scarcely imagine.' When war came, the cynicism of the educated class was evidenced by its many sons who evaded military service. Russian literature produced no Kipling to sing the praises of empire. Lack of self-belief, coupled to nationalistic aggressiveness, has always been a prominent contradiction in the Russian character. Nicholas's thoughtful subjects were conscious of their country's repeated failures in wars – against the British, French, Turks, Japanese. The last represented the first occasion in modern history when a European nation was defeated by an Asiatic one, which worsened the humiliation. In 1876 the foreign minister Prince Gorchakov told a colleague gloomily: 'we are a great, powerless country'. In 1909 Gen. A.A. Kireyev lamented in his diary, 'we have become a second-rate power'; he believed that imperial unity and moral cohesion were collapsing. When Russia acquiesced in Austria's annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina, he exclaimed bitterly: 'Shame! Shame! It would be better to die!'

France's new relationship with Russia began in 1894, when the two governments signed a military convention; it derived from a belief that neither nation could alone aspire to climb into the ring against Germany, which posed a common threat, and that only such an alliance could offer security against the Kaiser's expansionist ambitions. Thereafter, the French advanced large loans to St Petersburg, chiefly to fund the building of strategic railways. France had many cultural ties with Russia, symbolised by Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes*, the toast of Paris. The close military relationship known as the Dual Entente evolved progressively: in 1901, the Russians agreed with the French that their army would engage the Germans eighteen days after any declaration of war. France's cash funded a big rearmament programme; Russians even aspired to create a first-class navy by 1930.

The Tsar's peacetime army was Europe's largest – 1.42 million men, potentially rising to five million on mobilisation. But could they fight? Many foreigners were sceptical. After attending Russian manoeuvres, the British military attaché wrote: 'we saw much martial spectacle, but very

little serious training for modern war'. France's Gen. Joseph Joffre, invited to inspect Nicholas's forces in August 1913, agreed. He found some of the Tsar's advisers, the war minister among them, frankly hostile to their country's French alliance. The Russian army was burdened with weak leaders and chronic factionalism; one historian has written that it retained 'some of the characteristics of a dynastic bodyguard'. Its ethos was defined by brutal discipline rather than skill or motivation, though its commanders persuaded themselves that their men would fight better in a Slav cause than they had done against Japan in 1904–05.

Russians were proud of their role in helping to free much of the Balkans from Ottoman rule, and determined not to see this supplanted by Austrian or German hegemony. The semi-official St Petersburg newspaper *Novoe Vremya* wrote in June 1908 that it was impossible 'without ceasing to be Russian' to allow Germanic cultural domination of southern and eastern Europe. In 1913 the British minister in Belgrade, G.H. Barclay, wrote that 'Serbia is, practically speaking, a Russian province.' This was an exaggeration, because Serb leaders were intensely self-willed, but St Petersburg made plain that the country was under its protection. Russian security guarantees to Serbia proved as fatal to European peace as was German support for Austria – with the important difference that the former were defensive, the latter aggressive. But at the very least, Russia was irresponsible in failing to insist upon a halt to Serbian subversion in the Hapsburg Empire as the price for its military backing.

The south Slavs lived in four different states – the Hapsburg Empire, Serbia, Montenegro and Bulgaria – under eight different systems of government. Their impassioned nationalism imposed a dreadful blood forfeit: about 16 per cent of the entire population, almost two million men, women and children, perished violently in the six years of struggle that preceded Armistice Day 1918. Serbia fought two Balkan wars, in 1912 and 1913, to increase its size and power by seizing loose fragments of the Ottoman Empire. In 1912 the Russian foreign minister declared that a Serb–Bulgarian triumph over the Turks would be the worst outcome of the First Balkan War, because it would empower the local states to turn their aggressive instincts from Islamism, against Germanism: 'In this event one ... must prepare for a great and decisive general European war.' Yet the Serbs and Bulgarians indeed triumphed in that conflict; a subsequent Serb–Romanian victory in the Second Balkan War – a squabble over the spoils of the First – made matters worse. Serbia doubled its territory by

incorporating Macedonia and Kosovo. Serbians burst with pride, ambition and over-confidence. Wars seemed to work well for them.

In June 1914 the Russian minister in Belgrade, the dedicated pan-Slavist Nikolai Hartwig, was believed actively to desire an armed clash between Serbia and Austria, though St Petersburg almost certainly did not. The Russian ambassador in Constantinople complained that Hartwig, a former newspaper columnist, 'shows the activity of an irresponsible journalist'. Serbia was a young country wrested from the Ottoman Empire only in 1878, which now clung to the south-eastern frontier of the Hapsburg Empire like some malevolent growth. Western statesmen regarded the place with impatience and suspicion. Its self-assertiveness, its popular catchphrase 'Where a Serb dwells, there is Serbia,' destabilised the Balkans. Europe's chancelleries were irritated by its 'little Serbia', proud-victim culture. Serbs treated their own minority subjects, especially Muslims, with conspicuous and often murderous brutality. Every continental power recognised that the Serbs could achieve their ambition to enfold in their own polity two million brethren still under Hapsburg rule only at the cost of bringing down Franz Joseph's empire.

Just four and a half million Serbs occupied 87,300 square kilometres of rich rural regions and barren mountains, a smaller country than Romania or Greece. Four-fifths of them lived off the land, and the country retained an exotic oriental legacy from its long subjection to the Ottomans. Such industries as it had were agriculturally based – flour and sawmills, sugar refineries, tobacco. 'Within little more than two days' rail from [London],' wrote an enthusiastic pre-war British traveller, 'there lies an undeveloped country of extraordinary fertility and potential wealth, possessing a history more wonderful than any fairy tale, and a race of heroes and patriots who may one day set Europe by the ears ... I know no country which can offer so general an impression of beauty, so decided an aroma of the Middle Ages. The whole atmosphere is that of a thrilling romance. Conversation is larded with accounts of hairbreadth 'scapes and deeds of chivalry ... Every stranger is welcome, and an Englishman more than any.'

Others saw Serbia in much less roseate hues: the country exemplified the Balkan tradition of domestic violence, regime change by murder. On the night of 11 June 1903, a group of young Serb officers fell upon the tyrannical King Alexander and his hated Queen Draga by candlelight in the private apartments of their palace: the bodies were later found in the garden, riddled with bullets and mutilated. Among the assassins was

Dragutin Dimitrijević, who became the ‘Apis’ of the Sarajevo conspiracy: he was wounded in a clash with the royal guards, which earned him the status of a national hero. When King Peter returned from a long exile in Switzerland to take the throne of a notional constitutional monarchy, Serbia continued to seethe with factionalism. Peter had two sons: the elder, Djordje, educated in Russia, was a violent playboy who was forced to relinquish his claim to the throne after a 1908 scandal in which he kicked his butler to death. His brother Alexander, who became the royal heir, was suspected of attempting to poison Djordje. The Serb royal family provided no template for peaceful co-existence, and the army wielded as much power as that of a modern African statelet.

Though Serbia was a rural society, it boasted a dynamic economy and a Western-educated intellectual class. One of the latter’s aspiring sophisticates enthused to a foreign visitor: ‘I am so fond of this country. It is so pastoral, don’t you think? I am always reminded of Beethoven’s Pastoral Symphony.’ He whistled a few bars abstractedly. ‘No, I made a mistake. That is the Third, isn’t it?’ Centuries of Ottoman dominance had bequeathed an exotic Eastern cultural legacy. American correspondent John Reed wrote:

All sorts of people hung about the stations, men turbaned and fezzed and capped with conical hats of brown fur, men in Turkish trousers, or in long shirts and tights of creamy homespun linen, their leather vests richly worked in colored wheels and flowers, or in suits of heavy brown wool ornamented with patterns of black braid, high red sashes wound round and round their waists, leather sandals sewed to a circular spout on the toe and bound to the calf with leather ribbons wound to the knees; women with the Turkish yashmak and bloomers, or in leather and woolen jackets embroidered in bright colors, waists of the rare silk they weave in the village, embroidered linen underskirts, black aprons worked in flowers, heavy overskirts woven in vivid bars of color and caught up behind, and yellow or white silk kerchiefs on their heads.

In cafés, men drank Turkish coffee and ate *kaymak* cheese-butter. Every Sunday in village squares peasants gathered to dance – different dances for marriages, christenings, and even for each party at elections. They sang songs that were often political: ‘If you will pay my taxes for me, then I will vote for you!’ This was the nation that was the focus of intense Austrian anxiety and hostility, matched by Russian protectiveness. Whatever view

is adopted about Serbia's role in the crisis of 1914, it is hard to make a case that its people were martyred innocents.

In western Europe, Balkan violence was so familiar that new manifestations aroused only weary disdain. In Paris in June 1914, the general European situation was thought less dangerous than it had been in 1905 and 1911, when acute tensions between the Triple Alliance and the Triple Entente were defused by diplomacy. Raymond Poincaré, fifty-three years old, was a former conservative prime minister who was elected president in 1913, and made his office for the first time executive rather than ceremonial. Though he became the first holder of the post since 1870 to dine at the Germans' Paris embassy, he loathed and feared the Kaiser's nation, and caused support for Russia to become the central pillar of French foreign policy. Few responsible historians suggest that the French desired a European war in 1914, but to a remarkable degree Poincaré relinquished his country's independence of judgement about participating in such an event. The Germans were the historic enemies of his people. Their war plan was known to demand an immediate assault on France, before addressing Russia. Poincaré believed, perhaps not wrongly, that the Entente powers must hang together, or Germany would hang them separately.

France had recovered brilliantly from defeat by Prussia in 1870. Bismarck's annexation of the twin French provinces of Alsace and Lorraine as a strategic buffer zone west of the Rhine remained a grievance, but was no longer a bleeding wound in the national consciousness. The French Empire was prospering, despite chronic discontent among its Muslim subjects, especially in North Africa. The army's prestige had been appallingly damaged by its senior officers' decade-long parade of brutality, snobbery, stupidity and anti-Semitism in the Dreyfus case, but it was now recognised – though not by the Kaiser – as one of the most formidable fighting forces in Europe. France's surging fortunes and commitment to innovation were symbolised by the first telephone boxes, railway electrification, the birth of Michelin maps. The brothers Lumière pioneered the development of cinema. Transport was being mechanised, with Paris becoming the fourth world city to acquire a metro, soon transporting four hundred million passengers a year. It was acknowledged as the cultural capital of the world, home to the avant-garde and the finest painters on earth.

The Third Republic was known as the '*république des paysans*'; though social inequality persisted, the influence of the landowning class was

weaker than in any other European nation. French social welfare was evolving, with a voluntary pensions scheme, accident-insurance law, improved public health. France's middle class wielded more political power than that of any other European nation: Poincaré was the son of a civil servant, and himself a lawyer; former and future prime minister Georges Clemenceau was a doctor and the son of another. Insofar as the aristocracy played a part in any profession, it was the army, though it is noteworthy that the origins of France's principal soldiers of 1914–18, Joseph Joffre, Ferdinand Foch and Philippe Pétain, were alike modest. The influence of the Church was fast diminishing among the peasantry and the industrial masses; its residual power rested with the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie. The nation was becoming more socially enlightened: though Article 213 of the *Code Napoléon* still decreed that a wife owed legal obedience to her husband, a modest but growing number of women entered the legal or medical professions, foremost among them Marie Curie, who won two Nobel Prizes.

Rural conditions remained primitive, with peasants living in close proximity to their animals. Foreigners sneered that French standards of hygiene were low: most people had only one bath a week, and humbler middle-class men kept up appearances with false collars and cuffs. The French were more tolerant of brothels than any other nation in Europe, though there was some dispute about whether this reflected enlightenment or depravity. Alcoholism was a serious problem, worsened by rising prosperity: the average Frenchman consumed 162 litres of wine a year; some miners assuaged the harshness of their labours by drinking up to six litres a day. The country had half a million bars – one for every eighty-two people. Mothers were known to put wine in their babies' bottles, and doctors frequently prescribed it for illness, even in children. Alcohol and masculinity were deemed inseparable. To drink beer or water was unpatriotic.

French politicians were obsessed with the need to counter Germany's demographic advantage. Between 1890 and 1896, the years when many of those who would fight the First World War were born, Kaiser Wilhelm's people produced more than twice as many children as the Republic; the 1907 census showed France's population at just thirty-nine million, meaning that there were three Germans for every two Frenchmen. French working mothers received paid maternity leave, with a cash bonus to those who breast-fed. Health standards had risen impressively since the beginning of the twentieth century, when one in ten new French military recruits stood

less than five feet one inch tall, but many bourgeois families chose to defy their priests and restrict themselves to one child. Poincaré presented his 1913 three-year compulsory military service law as an essential defensive measure. By heroic endeavours, France had restored itself to the status of a great power. But almost no one, including its own people, supposed its unaided military strength the equal of Germany's – which was why it had sought the alliance with Russia.

The British, last-comer to create a third pillar of the Entente, ruled the largest empire the world had ever seen, and remained its foremost financial power, but discerning contemporaries understood that their dominance was waning. At home, vast new wealth was being generated, but social and political divisions had become acute. Britain's five million most prosperous inhabitants shared an annual income of £830 million, while the remaining thirty-eight millions made do with the balance, £880 million. The journalist George Dangerfield looked back at Britain's condition in the Edwardian and post-Edwardian era from the perspective of 1935 in his milestone work *The Strange Death of Liberal England*:

The new financier, the new plutocrat, had little of that sense of responsibility which once had sanctioned the power of England's landed classes. He was a purely international figure, or so it seemed, and money was his language ... Where did the money come from? Nobody seemed to care. It was there to be spent, and to be spent in the most ostentatious manner possible; for its new masters set the fashion ... Society in the last pre-war years grew wildly plutocratic; the middle classes became more complacent and dependent; only the workers seemed to be deprived of their share in prosperity ... The middle classes ... looked upon the producers of England with a jaundiced, a fearful and vindictive gaze.

In 1926 C.E. Montague took much the same view of the pre-1914 period in *Rough Justice*, an autobiographical novel: 'The English world that he loved, and believed in, seemed now to be failing, and failing first at the top ... The old riders seemed to be falling out with their horses – fearing them, not going near them if they could help it, shirking the old job of understanding their wants and sharing their slow, friendly thoughts ... The only rights of captaincy that the old ruling class had ever possessed were drawn from the strength of its members' love and knowledge of tenants, labourers, servants, private soldiers and sailors, their own lifelong comrades in

the rural economy, in sport, in the rearing of children and in the chivalries of war and adventure.' This was sentimental tosh, but reflected the fact that the aristocracy and the Conservative Party fought tooth and nail to resist the Liberals' 1909 introduction of basic social reforms.

Government and its bureaucracies scarcely impinged on most people's lives, for good or ill. It was possible to travel abroad without a passport, and freely to exchange unlimited sums of currency. A foreigner could take up residence in Britain without any process of official consent. Though since gaining office in 1905 the Liberals had doubled expenditure on social services, the £200 million raised by all forms of taxation in 1913–14 amounted to less than 8 per cent of national income. The school-leaving age was thirteen; at seventy a British citizen became eligible for a meagre pension, and in 1911 Lloyd George had created a primitive insurance scheme to protect the sick and unemployed.

Nonetheless, a decade into the new century the British worker was poorer in real terms than he had been in 1900, and disaffected in consequence. There were constant disputes and stoppages, especially in the coal industry. In 1910 seamen and dockers struck to demand a minimum wage and better working conditions; there was also a transport strike. Women workers in a Bermondsey confectionery factory, paid between seven and nine shillings a week – young girls got three shillings – won increases of one to four shillings a week after downing tools. In 1911, over ten million working days were lost to strikes – compare this with 2011's figure of 1.4 million days. Militancy derived not from trade union leaders, many of whom became as frightened as employers, but from the shop floor. A despairing union secretary told an industrial arbitrator that he could not understand what had come over the country: 'Everyone seems to have lost their heads.'

The hand of the state was most visible in its use of military power to suppress working-class revolt. In 1910 troops were deployed against rioters at the Rhondda Valley coal pits: Hussars and Lancashire Fusiliers were sent to Tonypany. Winston Churchill as home secretary dispatched a cavalry column to cow London's East End, home to thousands of striking dockers. During a rail strike, the Mayor of Chesterfield urged troops to fire on a mob wrecking the town's station; the officer in command prudently refused to give the order.

Coal owners were the least sympathetic representatives of contemporary capitalism: in 1912 they summarily rejected union demands that men should be paid five shillings a shift, boys two shillings – what became

known as 'the five and two'. This at a time when the London wine merchants Berry Bros charged ninety-six shillings a dozen for Veuve Clicquot champagne, sixty shillings a dozen for 1898 Nuits Saint-Georges. That year, over thirty-eight million working days were lost to strikes. Nor was it hard to understand workers' grievances: in October 1913 an explosion at Senghenydd colliery, caused by criminal management safety negligence, cost 439 lives. In the Commons tears ran down the face of Herbert Asquith, the prime minister, as he appealed to striking workers to return to the pits. Asquith's wife Margot, a raffish creature of indifferent judgement but forceful personality, sought to negotiate privately with the miners' leader to resolve the dispute. When he refused, she wrote crossly: 'I don't see why anyone should know we have met.' Between 1910 and 1914, trade union membership rose from 2.37 million to almost four million. In the seven months before the outbreak of war, British industry was hit by 937 strikes.

Yet at least as grave as industrial warfare was the Ulster crisis. Between 1912 and 1914 this created a real prospect of civil war within the United Kingdom. Home Rule for Ireland was the price Asquith had agreed to pay for the support of Irish MPs in passing his bitterly divisive 1909 budget, seed of the Welfare State. Thereafter the Protestants of Ulster, determined to resist becoming a minority in a Catholic-ruled society, armed themselves. Their rejection of the Home Rule legislation then passing through Parliament won the support of the Conservative Party and its leaders, even unto preparing violent resistance to its implementation. Much of the aristocracy owned Irish property, which spawned a special sense of outrage against Asquith.

In March 1914, some army officers made explicit their refusal to participate in coercion of the Ulster rebels through the so-called 'Curragh Mutiny', which precipitated the resignation of the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Field-Marshal Sir John French, and the secretary for war, Col. Jack Seely. The latter, in a moment of madness, told the commander-in-chief that officers who did not wish to serve in Ulster could 'disappear'. Maj. Gen. Sir Henry Wilson, director of military operations at the War Office, wrote triumphantly in his diary: 'we soldiers beat Asquith and his vile tricks'. The prime minister temporarily took on the war portfolio himself.

The Liberals whom Asquith led formed one of the most talented administrations in British history, dominated in 1914 by such figures as Lloyd George, Chancellor of the Exchequer; Winston Churchill, First Lord of the Admiralty; Richard Haldane, a former reforming war minister, now

Lord Chancellor. The prime minister himself was a survivor of an earlier era, old enough to have seen, as a boy of twelve in 1864, the bodies of five murderers dangling from the gallows outside Newgate, their heads concealed by white hoods. A lawyer of modest middle-class origins, 'a Roman reserve was always natural to Asquith', in the words of his biographer. 'He fought against any expression of his stronger feelings.' George Dangerfield went further, asserting that Asquith lacked imagination and passion; that, for all his high intelligence, he failed convincingly to address any of the great crises which overtook Britain during his years of office: 'He was ingenious but not subtle, he could improvise quite brilliantly on somebody else's theme. He was moderately imperialist, moderately progressive, moderately humorous, and being the most fastidious of Liberal politicians, only moderately evasive.' If this judgement was cynical, it is plain that by August 1914 Asquith was a tired old man.

British politics had become savage in temper and often irresponsible in conduct. Lord Halsbury, a veteran Conservative lawyer, denounced 'government by a cabinet controlled by rank socialists'. A Tory MP hurled a rule book at Winston Churchill in the Commons library, striking him in the face. Before the great Ulster struggle, rival party leaders were often seen in the same drawing room, but now they and their respective followers were socially estranged. When Margot Asquith wrote to protest at being excluded from Lord Curzon's May ball, attended by the King and Queen, Curzon replied haughtily that it would be 'impolitic to invite, even to a social gathering, the wife and daughter of the head of a Government to which the majority of my friends are inflexibly opposed'.

The Scottish-Canadian Bonar Law had succeeded Arthur Balfour as Tory standard-bearer in November 1911, and played the Ulster 'Orange card' as a cynical gambit against the Liberals. On 28 November 1913, the leader of 'His Majesty's Loyal Opposition' publicly appealed to the British Army not to enforce Home Rule in northern Ireland. This was a staggering piece of constitutional impropriety, which nonetheless commanded the support of his party and most of the aristocracy, while not provoking the censure of the King. Prominent among the Unionists was the lawyer Sir Edward Carson, courtroom nemesis of Oscar Wilde and aptly characterised as 'an intelligent fanatic'. Captain James Craig, leader of the rebellious Ulstermen, wrote: 'There is a spirit spreading abroad which I can testify to from my personal knowledge, that Germany and the German Emperor would be preferable to the rule of John Redmond [and his Irish Home Rulers].'

Field-Marshal Lord Roberts, Britain's most famous old soldier, publicly applauded the April 1914 shipment of guns to the Protestant rebels, and declared that any attempt to coerce Ulster would be 'the ruin of the army'. Thousands of openly armed men paraded in Belfast, addressed by Carson, Craig and that most incendiary of Conservatives, F.E. Smith. And all the while the British government did – nothing. In southern Ireland, militant nationalists took their cue from Carson and his success in defying Parliament: they set about procuring their own weapons. The British Army proved much less indulgent to nationalist militancy than to the Ulstermen's excesses. On Sunday, 26 July 1914 at Bachelor's Walk in Dublin, troops fired on unarmed civilians – admittedly in the aftermath of a gun-running episode – killing three and injuring thirty-eight.

If the British Empire was viewed around the world as rich and powerful, the Asquith government was seen as chronically weak. It was conspicuously failing to quell violent industrial action or the Ulster madness. It seemed unable effectively to address even the suffragette movement, whose clamorous campaign for votes for women had become deafening. Militants were smashing windows all over London; using acid to burn slogans on golf club greens; hunger-striking in prison. In June 1913 Emily Davison was killed after being struck by the King's horse at the Derby. In the first seven months of 1914, 107 buildings were set on fire by suffragettes.

Asquith's critics ignored an obvious point: no man could have contained or suppressed the huge social and political forces shaking Britain. George Dangerfield wrote: 'Very few prime ministers in history have been afflicted by so many plagues and in so short a space of time.' The prominent Irish Home Ruler John Dillon told Wilfrid Scawen Blunt: 'the country is menaced with revolution'. Domestic strife made a powerful impression on opinion abroad: a great democracy was seen to be sinking into decadence and decay. Britain's allies, France and Russia, were dismayed. Its prospective enemies, notably in Germany, found it hard to imagine that a country convulsed in such a fashion – with even its little army riven by faction – could threaten their continental power and ambitions.

2 BATTLE PLANS

Many Europeans anticipated with varying degrees of enthusiasm that their two rival alliances would sooner or later come to blows. Far from being regarded as unthinkable, continental war was viewed as a highly

plausible, and by no means intolerable, outcome of international tensions. Europe had twenty million regular soldiers and reservists, and each nation developed plans for every contingency in which they might be deployed. All the prospective belligerents proposed to attack. The British Army's 1909 Field Service Regulations, largely drafted by Sir Douglas Haig, asserted: 'Decisive success in battle can be gained only by a vigorous offensive.' In February 1914, Russian military intelligence passed to its government two German memoranda, discussing the need to prepare public opinion for a two-front war. The Triple Alliance's third party, Italy, was notionally committed to fight alongside Germany and Austria, which meant that the French must allocate troops not only to meet the Germans, but also to defend their south-eastern frontier. All the European powers remained nonetheless uncertain what Italy would do in the event of a war, as were Italians themselves. What seemed plain was that the Rome government would eventually offer support to whichever power promised to indulge its ambitions for territorial aggrandisement.

In Germany, chief of staff Helmuth von Moltke inherited in 1906 from his predecessor, Alfred Graf von Schlieffen, a scheme for a massive sweeping advance through northern France, around Paris, to smash the French army before turning on Russia. For the past century, Schlieffen's vision has lain at the heart of all debate about whether Germany might have won the war in 1914. The confidence of the nation's leadership that it could successfully launch a general European conflict rested entirely upon the Schlieffen concept, or more exactly Moltke's modification of it.

The Kaiser liked to pretend that he ruled Germany, and occasionally he did so; his appointed chancellor, the liberal-conservative Bethmann Hollweg, exercised varying influence, while striving to manage an increasingly hostile Reichstag. But the most powerful single figure in the Wilhelmine Empire was Moltke, controlling the most formidable military machine in Europe. He was an unexpected general, a Christian Scientist who played the cello and was prey to deep melancholy – '*der traurige Julius*' – 'sad Julius'. Conspicuous in his life were devotion to his wife and a fascination with the afterlife, spiritualism and the occult, which she encouraged. Moltke believed that he occupied the most honourable position on earth. He and the army answered to no politician, only to the Kaiser.

The Great General Staff, which operated under his direction, was Germany's most respected institution. It consisted of 625 officers, who worked in a building on Berlin's Königsplatz in which Moltke and his family occupied a flat. Security was tight: there were no secretaries or

clerks; staff officers drafted all documents. Once the cleaners left each morning, no women save Eliza Moltke and her maid entered the building. Each year when a new mobilisation plan was prepared, copies of the redundant version were meticulously destroyed. The Staff's output owed little to technology: it owned no automobiles; even the influential Railway Department had only one typewriter; urgent telephone calls were made from a single box in a corridor. There was no canteen, and most officers brought in packed lunches to eat at their desks during working days of twelve to fourteen hours. Every member of the General Staff was taught to think of himself as one among a hallowed elite, subject to social rules which were meticulously observed: no man – for instance – might enter a bar frequented by socialists.

Moltke himself sought to convey an impression of personal strength that would soon prove to have been illusory, but which exercised a critical influence on the advance to war. A highly intelligent and cultured man, he rose through a close association with the Kaiser, which began when he served as adjutant to his uncle, 'the great Moltke', victor over France in 1870–71. Wilhelm found the hero's nephew congenial, and clung to a conviction that the old man's genius must have passed to the next generation. But the decision to appoint Helmuth chief of staff was controversial, indeed to some shocking. One of Moltke's former military instructors wrote: 'This man could be disastrous.' Wilhelm's choice plainly derived from their personal relationship: he found the general an agreeable companion with a pleasing bedside manner, that essential requirement for courtiers through the ages. Moltke had shown himself a competent officer without offering – or having much opportunity to display – evidence of military genius.

It was ironic that after 1890 the elder Moltke argued that Europe's fate should thenceforth be decided diplomatically rather than on the battlefield: he thought the usefulness of war to Germany was exhausted. But from 1906 onwards, his much less gifted nephew professed to think that Schlieffen's concept of a grand envelopment offered the prospect of securing German dominance of Europe. Moltke told Austrian chief of staff Conrad von Hötzendorf in February 1913: 'Austria's fate will not be definitively decided along the Bug but rather along the Seine.' He became imbued with faith that new technologies – balloons and motor vehicles – would empower highly centralised battlefield control of Germany's armies by himself. Some other senior officers were much more sceptical. Karl von Einem, especially, warned about the difficulties of directing the

movements of almost three million men, and the likely operational limitations of unfit and ill-trained reservists; he anticipated in a fashion that proved prescient a progressive loss of momentum during the proposed epic dash across France.

Moltke, however, remained if not an enthusiast, at least a consistent fatalist about the inevitability of war with Russia and France. In October 1912, by then sixty-four, he said: 'If war is coming, I hope it will come soon, before I am too old to cope with things satisfactorily.' He told the Kaiser he was confident a decisive campaign could be swiftly won, and restated this advice early in the 1914 July crisis. The huge enigma about the chief of staff was that all the while, he nursed private doubts and fears which would burst forth in the most dramatic fashion when conflict came. The rational part of his nature told him that a great clash between great powers must be protracted and hard, not swift and easy. He once told the Kaiser: 'the next war will be a national war. It will not be settled by one decisive battle but will be a long wearisome struggle with an enemy who will not be overcome until his whole national force is broken ... a war which will utterly exhaust our own people even if we are victorious.'

Yet his own conduct in the years before 1914 belied such prudent caution. He acquiesced in the prospect of a grand European collision with a steadiness that prevailed when others – Bethmann and the Kaiser – sometimes faltered. Germany's highest commander succumbed to a disease common among senior soldiers of many nationalities and eras: he wished to demonstrate to his government and people that their vastly expensive armed forces could fulfil their fantasies. Moltke famously, or notoriously, characterised himself to Prince von Bülow: 'I do not lack personal courage, but I lack the power of rapid decision; I am too reflective, too scrupulous, or, if you like, too conscientious for such a post. I lack the capacity for risking all on a single throw.' Yet, in contradiction of such a profession of self-knowledge, he yearned to show himself worthy of a responsibility for which most of his peers thought him unfit, by achieving a triumph for his country. This required an awesomely fast mobilisation and concentration of forces; the deployment of a small holding force to check the Russians, while the nation's overwhelming strength conquered France in a campaign of forty days, before turning East.

Austria-Hungary's plans were more flexible, indeed chaotic, because the Empire could not be sure whether it would be fighting Serbia alone – as it hoped – or contesting a second front on its Galician border with Russian Poland. Many bizarre figures jostled for attention on the European

stage in 1914, but Conrad Hötzendorf was notable among them. Churchill described him as a 'dark, small, frail, thin officer with piercing and expressive eyes set in the face of an ascetic'. It is hard to imagine a man less suited to his role: an epic incompetent, he was also an extreme imperialist, wanting the Hapsburgs to dominate the Adriatic, the eastern Mediterranean, the Balkans and North Africa. He perfectly fulfilled the elder Moltke's dictum about the most dangerous kind of officer, by being both stupid and intensely energetic. His wife had died a decade earlier, and he shared a home with his mother. He had lately fallen in love with Virginie von Reininghaus, a brewery magnate's wife, who became his obsession. He convinced himself that if he could lead Austria to a great military victory, he could surf a wave of personal glory to persuade his Gina to divorce her husband and marry him. He wrote to her of his hope for a 'war from which I could return crowned with success that would allow me to break through all the barriers between us ... and claim you as my own dearest wife'.

Since 1906 Conrad had been demanding military action against Serbia. In the seventeen months between 1 January 1913 and 1 June 1914, the chief of staff urged war on his government twenty-six times. He wrote to Moltke on St Valentine's Day 1914, asserting the urgency of Austria's need to 'break the ring that once again threatens to enclose us'. For Conrad, and indeed for Berchtold, the Archduke's death offered a heaven-sent excuse for war, rather than a justification for it. After witnessing the shrinkage of the Ottoman Empire, humbled by young and assertive Balkan nations during the regional conflicts of the preceding three years, Conrad believed that Sarajevo offered Austria its last chance to escape the same fate, by destroying the threat of assertive Slavdom embodied by Serbia. He said: 'Such an ancient monarchy and such an ancient army [as those of the Hapsburgs] cannot perish ingloriously.'

Berchtold, Austria's foreign minister, characterised Conrad's policy in July 1914 as 'war, war, war'. Wishing to expunge the shame of Austria's 1866 defeat by Prussia, the general deplored 'this foul peace which drags on and on'. So powerful was his craving for military collision that he gave scarcely a thought to its practical aspects. For years Austria's army had lagged behind those of its neighbours, gathering mould. Parliament resisted the higher taxes that would have been required by bigger budgets, and the navy consumed much of the available cash. Though Austrian industry developed good weapons – especially heavy artillery and the M95 rifle – the army remained too poor to buy them in adequate numbers.

There were many disaffected people among the hotchpotch of ethnic minorities that made up the Empire. According to 1911 figures, among every thousand Austro-Hungarian soldiers, there were an average of 267 Germans, 233 Hungarians, 135 Czechs, eighty-five Poles, eighty-one Ukrainians, sixty-seven Croatians and Serbs, fifty-four Romanians, thirty-eight Slovaks, twenty-six Slovenes and fourteen Italians. Of the officer corps, by contrast, 76.1 per cent were Germans, 10.7 per cent Hungarians and 5.2 per cent Czechs. In proportion to population, Germans had three times their rightful number of officers, Hungarians half, Slavs about one-tenth. The Austrian army was thus run on colonial lines, with many Slav riflemen led into battle by Germans, rather as British officers led their Indian Army. Of all the European powers, Austria was least fit to justify its pretensions on the battlefield. Conrad simply assumed that, if Russia intervened in Serbia's interest, the Germans would take the strain.

Vienna had been urged by Berlin to adopt harsh policies towards the Serbs. As early as 1912, Wilhelm and Moltke assured Franz Ferdinand and Conrad that they 'could fully count on Germany's support in all circumstances' – what some historians have called 'the first blank cheque'. Nor did Berlin make any secret of its commitment: on 28 November the secretary of state, Alfred von Kiderlen-Waechter, told the Reichstag: 'If Austria is forced, for whatever reason, to fight for its position as a Great Power, then we must stand by her side.' Bethmann Hollweg echoed this message on 2 December, saying that if the Austrians were attacked by Russia for asserting their legitimate interests in the Balkans, 'then we would fight for the maintenance of our own position in Europe, in defence of our own future and security'.

A meeting of the Kaiser and his warlords – Bethmann and foreign minister Gottlieb von Jagow were absent – which took place at the Royal Palace on 8 December 1912 has been the focus of intense attention throughout the three generations since it was revealed. Wilhelm and Germany's principal generals and admirals debated Haldane's reported insistence upon Britain's commitment to preserving a continental balance of power. Though no minutes were taken, immediately afterwards Georg Müller, chief of Wilhelm's naval cabinet, recorded in his diary that Moltke said: 'War the sooner the better.' The admiral added on his own account: 'he does not draw the logical conclusion from this, which is to present Russia or France or both with an ultimatum which would unleash the war with right on our side'.

Three other sources confirm Müller's account, including that of Saxony's military plenipotentiary in Berlin, who wrote on the 11th to his state's minister of war: 'His Excellency von Moltke wants war ... His Excellency von Tirpitz on the other hand would prefer if it came in a year's time when the [Kiel] canal and the Heligoland submarine base would be ready.' Following the 8 December meeting, Germany's leaders agreed that there should be a press campaign to prepare the nation to fight Russia, though this did not happen. Müller wrote to Bethmann to inform him of the meeting's conclusions. Even if a cautious view is taken of the 1912 War Council's significance, rejecting the darkest 'Fischer' thesis that Germany thereafter directed policy towards precipitating a general European conflict, the record of subsequent German conduct shows Berlin strikingly untroubled by the prospect of such an outcome. The nation's leaders were confident they could prevail, so long as a clash came before Russian rearmament was completed in 1916. Müller felt obliged to inform the Kaiser that some senior officers were so convinced war was imminent that they had transferred their personal holdings of cash and shares into gold.

Bethmann at times thereafter seemed to waver. For instance, he said in June 1913: 'I have had enough of war and bellicose talk and of eternal armaments. It is high time that the great nations settle down and pursue peaceful work. Otherwise it will certainly come to an explosion, which no one wants and which will hurt everyone.' Yet the chancellor played a prominent role in strengthening Germany's war machine. In conversation with Field-Marshal Wilhelm von der Goltz, he told the old soldier and military intellectual that he could secure the Reichstag's support for any amount of military funding. Goltz responded that in that case the army had better hurry to present its shopping list. Yes, said the chancellor, but if you ask for a lot of money you will need to be seen to use it soon – to strike. Goltz warmly agreed. Then Bethmann added, in a characteristic moment of hesitation: 'But even Bismarck avoided a preventive war in the year [18]75.' He was very conscious that the Iron Chancellor, towards the end of his life, had urged that Germany should stop fighting. Goltz said scornfully that it was easy for Bismarck to take that line, after winning three earlier wars. Bethmann became a prime mover in pushing through parliament the huge 1913 Army Bill, which dramatically increased the nation's military strength.

Meanwhile, Moltke was only the foremost of Germany's leading soldiers who, during the nineteen months between the December 1912 War Council and the August 1914 outbreak of war, displayed a keen appetite

for a European showdown. In May of the latter year, army quartermaster-general Gen. Count Georg von Waldersee wrote a memorandum which expressed optimism about Germany's immediate strategic prospects, coupled to gloom about the longer term: 'Germany has no reason to expect to be attacked in the near future, but ... it not only has no reason whatever to avoid a conflict, but also, more than that, the chances of achieving a speedy victory in a major European war are today still very favourable for Germany and for the Triple Alliance as well. Soon, however, this will no longer be the case.' There is vastly more documentary evidence to support the case that German leaders were willing for war in 1914 than exists to sustain any of the alternative scenarios proposed in recent years.

The Triple Entente had in common with the Triple Alliance the fact that only two of its parties were firmly committed to fight together. It represented an expression of goodwill and possible – but by no means assured – military collaboration: something more than that between France and Russia, something less on the part of Britain. The Russians always knew that they must fight any war from the exposed salient of Poland, vulnerable in the north and west to Germany, in the south to the Hapsburg Empire. The race to deploy forces following mobilisation was in the Russians' eyes a race to save Poland; their first priority was to secure its borders.

Back in 1900 they had made a decision to launch simultaneous offensives against the Germans in East Prussia, against the Austrians in Galicia. Though they wavered about this in 1905, by 1912 they had renewed the commitment, and sustained it thereafter: they were much attracted to the notion of conquering Hapsburg Galicia, and thus acquiring a strong new mountain frontier on the Carpathians. They had two alternative schemes. The first, 'Plan G', covered the unlikely contingency that Germany deployed the bulk of its army in the East. The second, implemented in 1914, was 'Plan A'. This required two armies to drive into East Prussia as a preliminary to an invasion of Germany proper. Meanwhile a further three armies were to launch the main thrust against the Austrians, driving them back to the Carpathians.

France proposed to implement against Germany its 'Plan XVII'. This had been refined by Joffre, but was far less detailed than Moltke's arrangements. Where Schlieffen sketched a design for a grand invasion of France, the French General Staff merely schemed operations against the German army, though these assumed a subsequent advance into the Kaiser's realm.

Plan XVII principally addressed the logistics for concentrating forces behind the frontier, and contained no timetable for operations, nor commitment to explicit territorial objectives. Much more important than the plan were the ethos and doctrine promoted with messianic fervour by the chief of staff. 'The French Army,' declared its 1913 Regulations, the work of Joffre, 'returning to its traditions, henceforth knows no law but the offensive.' Berlin's best source in Paris, 'Agent 17', an Austrian *boulevardier* named Baron Schluga von Tastenfeld who acquired much of his information by mingling at the grand salons, informed Moltke – correctly – that Joffre was likely to make his main effort in the Ardennes, at the centre of the front.

France's chief of staff was a technician, not an intellectual. Always a grave figure, he had acquired in childhood the nickname '*le père Joffre*' – 'Papa Joffre'. German intelligence characterised him as hard-working and responsible, but judged him too slow and heavy to respond effectively to such a spectacular initiative as the Schlieffen envelopment. French politicians, however, approved of Joffre because – unlike many of his peers – he was devoid of personal political ambitions. They also found him refreshingly direct. Legend held that Joseph Caillaux, France's leader during the Agadir crisis, asked the chief of staff, then newly appointed: 'General, they say Napoleon waged war only if he thought he had a 70–30 chance of winning. Have we a 70–30 chance?' Joffre answered tersely: '*Non, monsieur le premier ministre.*'

Whether or not the chief of staff indeed took such a cautious view in 1911, he had since become more confident. Joffre believed that, in partnership with the Russians, the French army now possessed the strength, and above all the spirit, to vanquish the Germans. He made a misjudgement common to all Europe's soldiers in 1914, based upon an exaggerated belief in the power of human courage. The French called it '*cran*' – guts – and '*élan vital*'. Training emphasised the overriding importance of the will to win. The French army equipped itself with large numbers of its superb *soixante-quinze* – a 75mm quick-firing field gun – but neglected howitzers and heavy artillery, which it considered irrelevant to its offensive doctrine. Events would demonstrate that 75s and *cran* did not constitute an effective system for making war, but in the summer of 1914 Joffre and most of his colleagues supposed that they did.

As for French appraisals of German intentions, the intelligence officers of the Deuxième Bureau importantly underestimated the overall strength of the German army, because they did not anticipate that Moltke would

deploy his reserve formations alongside his regular ones; they also thought he would send twenty-two divisions to face the Russians, whereas in reality he committed only eleven. They correctly predicted that the Germans would attempt an envelopment, but because of their misjudgement of enemy strength, they greatly mistook its geographical scope. They supposed that the Germans would come through only a corner of Belgium, instead of sweeping across the entire country. Joffre calculated that German concentrations in the north and south must make Moltke's centre weak, and vulnerable to a French thrust. In this he was quite mistaken.

Both sides' commanders grossly underrated their opponents. Elaborate rival plans for mobilisation and deployment were not the cause of conflict in 1914, but the Great Powers might have been much less willing for war had their soldiers recognised the fundamental weakness of their offensive doctrine. All the nations' assessments were critically influenced by Japanese successes in attack in 1905, against Russian machine-guns. They concluded that this experience demonstrated that if the spirit was sufficiently exalted, it could prevail against modern technology.

Enthusiastic British patriots, in the early summer of 1914, were looking forward to a commemoration the following June of the centenary of the Battle of Waterloo: they proposed to make the occasion a celebration of the fact that for a hundred years no British army had shed blood in western Europe. Nonetheless, cautious contingency plans were in place to do so again. The British and French armies had begun staff talks in 1906, and Britain signed an agreement with Russia the following year. The Russians, however, saw reason to question their new friend's good faith when in 1912 a British shipyard began building for the Turks two battleships, which represented a mortal threat to the Tsar's dominance of the Black Sea. Challenged by St Petersburg, the Foreign Office responded blithely that it could not interfere with private commercial contracts. A British naval mission was meanwhile aiding the Turkish fleet, at the same time as Liman von Sanders trained the Turkish army.

Once in 1908 when Bethmann Hollweg was dining with Lloyd George, Germany's chancellor became strident, waving his arms as he denounced the 'iron ring' enemies were forging around his nation: 'England is embracing France. She is making friends with Russia. But it is not that you love each other; it is that you hate Germany!' Bethmann was wrong. Britain's adherence to the Entente was prompted much less by enthusiasm for embracing Russia and France as allies or partners against the Kaiser than

by a desire to diminish the number of Britain's enemies. It was increasingly understood, at least in Whitehall, that the vast empire of which the British people were so proud threatened to become an economic and strategic burden rather than a source of wealth. Russian power in central Asia, and the Great Game which derived from it, demanded much effort and expenditure to counter. Britain's 1898 confrontation with France over Fashoda on the Upper Nile had reawakened visceral jealousies and enmities. What evolved during the first decade of the twentieth century was less a triple entente to which Britain was a committed partner, than two parallel processes of détente.

Sazonov, in St Petersburg, knew how badly his country and France needed Britain. He wrote on 31 December 1913: 'Both powers [France and Russia] are scarcely capable of dealing Germany a mortal blow even in the event of success on the battlefield, which is always uncertain. But a struggle in which England took part might be fatal for Germany.' Thus the foreign minister was infuriated by London's 'vacillating and self-effacing policy', which he considered a critical impediment to deterrence. But British enthusiasm for Russia remained tepid. It was a source of embarrassment to many doughty democrats that their country should be associated with an absolutist autocracy, and worse still with its Balkan clients. In Paris near the climax of the July 1914 crisis, Raymond Recouly of *Le Figaro* met Sir Francis Bertie, the British ambassador, as he was about to enter the Quai d'Orsay. The Englishman, nicknamed 'the Bull' by colleagues, wrung his hands about Europe's condition, then said: 'Do you trust the Russians? We don't, above half!' He added: 'I would say pretty much the same of the Serbs. That is why our country is not going to feel comfortable about entering a quarrel in which the Serbs and Russians are involved.' Moreover, many British people, especially the elderly, were less than enthusiastic about entering any conflict on the same side as France. Lord Rosebery said crossly in 1904 when his Conservative colleagues welcomed the Entente: 'You are all wrong. It means war with Germany in the end!' Old Lady Londesborough, Wellington's great-niece, told Osbert Sitwell in 1914: 'It's not the Germans but the French I'm frightened of!'

Such mistrust was reciprocal. A prime motive for President Poincaré's determination to cling close to Russia as a military ally was his fear that Britain would not be there beside the French army on the day. While France and Russia had signed a bilateral treaty and were committed to support each other against attack, Britain was party to no such intimate pact, instead merely to expressions of good intentions, and army and naval

staff talks. The first discussions of a possible expeditionary force to France took place in December 1908. Thereafter, a sub-committee meeting of the Committee of Imperial Defence on 23 August 1911, attended by Asquith and Churchill, addressed at length the contingency that Britain would be obliged to intervene in the event of a European war. One modern historian has suggested that this gathering 'set the course for a military confrontation between Britain and Germany'. That seems a wild exaggeration: no one knew better than Asquith how reluctant might be his own party, and Parliament, to endorse participation in a European conflict.

The prime minister wrote sternly after the CID meeting that 'all questions of policy have been & must be reserved for the decision of the Cabinet, & it is quite outside the function of military or naval officers to prejudge such questions'. The contemporary view of an exasperated senior British staff officer – Henry Wilson – was that 'there was still no definite agreement with France to come in with her, nothing but a very grudging authorisation by our Gov to the General Staff on the theory of eventual co-operation'. This seems about right. The head of the Foreign Office, Sir Arthur Nicolson, reminded the foreign secretary in August 1914 that 'you have over and over again promised M. Cambon [the French ambassador] that if Germany was the aggressor you would stand by France'. Grey replied in a manner that justified every French prejudice about Anglo-Saxon duplicity: 'Yes, but he has nothing in writing.'

One recent chronicler of this period suggests that Asquith's ministers and generals engaged in 'enthusiastic planning for war' following the 1911 meeting. Precautionary steps were certainly taken and plans made from that year onwards – for instance, earmarking Oxford University's Examination Schools for use as a hospital. But it seems impossible justly to characterise these measures as enthusiastic. What was extraordinary about all British policy-making during the evolution of the Entente, reflected in attitudes struck at the 1911 CID meeting, was that the government acknowledged possible participation in a continental war, while proposing to contribute an absurdly small army to fulfilling such a purpose. Winston Churchill wrote later that as a young cavalry officer in the 1890s, he and his kind were so conscious of the insignificance of the British Army by comparison with its continental counterparts that 'no Jingo lieutenant or fire-eating staff officer ... even in his most sanguine moments, would have believed that our little Army would again be sent to Europe'. Fifteen years on, while Haldane had reformed the army's structure, it remained tiny by continental standards. The 1913 Army Estimates

made no mention whatsoever of a possible British ground role in a European conflict. The putative Expeditionary Force was given that designation because nobody knew where abroad it might be deployed – conceivably in India, Africa, the Middle East.

Here was a manifestation of a huge, historic British folly, repeated over many centuries including the twenty-first: the adoption of gesture strategy, committing small forces as an earnest of good intentions, heedless of their gross inadequacy for the military purpose at hand. Since 1907, Lord Northcliffe had been campaigning for conscription in his *Daily Mail*, to create a British army of a size to match the Empire's greatness, but his crusade roused little support. The most grievous charge against the Asquith government, and explicitly against the foreign secretary Sir Edward Grey, is that they pursued policies which sensibly acknowledged a likelihood that Britain would be unable to remain neutral in the event of a general European war, because German hegemony on the continent would represent an intolerable outcome, but they declined to take appropriate practical measures to participate in such a struggle.

Grey is usually depicted as a gentle, civilised figure who lamented the coming of war in 1914 with unaccustomed eloquence, and wrote fine books on birdwatching and fly-fishing. A widower of fifty-two, his personal affairs were less arid than most of his contemporaries assumed. He conducted a lively love life, albeit much more discreetly than his colleague Lloyd George; Grey's most recent biographer identifies two illegitimate children. Some of his contemporaries disdained him. Sir Eyre Crowe, a Foreign Office official who was admittedly prone to intemperance, called Grey 'a futile, useless, weak fool'. The foreign secretary's accustomed taciturnity caused Lloyd George, for one, to conclude that there was less to him than met the eye; that his economy with words reflected not strength of character, but debility. Grey spoke no foreign languages, and disliked Abroad. Although a highly intelligent man, he was also a narrow one, subject to violent mood swings.

Yet from 1905 to 1916 he ran Britain's foreign policy as a private bailiwick. Lloyd George wrote: 'During the eight years that preceded the war, the Cabinet devoted a ridiculously small percentage of its time to a consideration of foreign affairs.' The Asquith government's attitude to such matters, and to the other European powers, reflected an epic moral conceit, manifested in a condescension which especially upset the Germans. The French ambassador in London, Paul Cambon, observed sardonically that nothing gave greater pleasure to an Englishman than to discover that the

interests of England matched those of mankind at large: 'and where such a confluence does not exist, he does his best to create it'. At a dinner party where several members of the government were present, Lord Northcliffe asserted contemptuously that Britain's newspaper editors were better informed about foreign affairs than any cabinet minister. The chancellor said of the foreign secretary: 'Sir Edward Grey belongs to the class which, through heredity and tradition, expects to find a place on the magisterial bench to sit in judgement upon and above their fellow men, before they ever have any opportunity to make themselves acquainted with the tasks and trials of mankind.'

This was a characteristically nasty jibe, but Henry Wilson wrote after his own 1911 conversations with ministers about conflict scenarios that he was not impressed by 'the grasp of the situation possessed by Grey and Haldane [then secretary for war], Grey being much the most ignorant & careless of the two, he not only had no idea of what war means but he struck me as not wanting to know ... an ignorant, vain & weak man quite unfit to be the Foreign Minister of any country larger than Portugal'. Bernard Shaw hated Grey as 'a Junker from his topmost hair to the tips of his toes ... [with] a personal taste for mendacity', a charge that related to a brutal British response to a 1906 Egyptian village dispute about officers' pigeon-shooting rights.

If this was Shavian hyperbole, Grey's secret diplomacy was certainly high-handed – as was all British conduct of foreign affairs in that era. In August 1904 Lord Percy, for the then-Conservative government, responded with patrician magnificence to a Commons question about the newly concluded Anglo-French Agreement: 'Speculation and conjecture as to the existence or non-existence of secret clauses in international treaties is a public privilege, the maintenance of which depends upon official reticence.' But Asquith wrote to Grey on 5 September 1911, warning about the perils of the dialogue the foreign secretary had authorised between the British and French general staffs: 'My dear Grey, Conversations such as that between Gen. Joffre and Col. Fairholme seem to me rather dangerous; especially the part which refers to possible British assistance. The French ought not to be encouraged, in present circumstances, to make their plans on any assumptions of this kind. Yours always, H.H.A.'

Yet amid the prime minister's huge difficulties at home, by default he allowed Grey almost a free hand abroad. The foreign secretary felt able to give assurances to France about likely British support in the event of war, without reference to the full cabinet or the House of Commons, in a

manner incompatible with modern or even contemporary notions of democratic governance, and arguably unmatched until the far less defensible 1956 Anglo-French collusion to invade Egypt. Grey acted in secrecy because he knew he could secure no parliamentary mandate. During the July crisis, his personal willingness for Britain to fight beside France ran well ahead of that of most of his government colleagues or the public.

But it is hard to sustain the argument that Grey thus bears a large responsibility for war because of his failure either to speak frankly to the British people during the last years of peace, or explicitly to warn Berlin that Britain would not remain neutral. The Germans, in pursuing their course in 1914, had discounted British intervention and were unimpressed by the potential involvement of an army they despised. They were undeterred by the economic perils posed by Britain's absolute dominance of the world's merchant shipping and capability for imposing a blockade, because they intended to win quickly. It is unlikely that any course of action adopted by Asquith's government could have averted a European war in 1914, though another foreign secretary might have adopted a different view about British participation.

The planned British Expeditionary Force was well-equipped for its size, but its inadequate mass reflected reluctance to spend big money on soldiers when the Royal Navy was absorbing a quarter of state expenditure. Henry Wilson, as director of military operations between 1910 and 1914, spoke of 'our funny little army', and said contemptuously that there was no military problem on the continent to which the appropriate British answer was a mere six divisions. But these were all the government would stand for, and its policy reflected popular sentiment. Sailors were what the British loved and cherished; by contrast both the regular and the Territorial forces were under-recruited, with enthusiasm for military service especially low among country-dwellers and the Welsh.

Wilson played a critical role in promoting a military relationship with France much closer than most British soldiers wanted, or the cabinet knew. A brilliantly fluent speaker, of erratic and often reckless convictions, he failed the military academy entrance exams five times. He was a long-time advocate of conscription, describing the part-time volunteers of the Territorial Force as 'the best & most patriotic men in England because they are trying to do something'. In 1910, as commandant of the Staff College, he asserted the likelihood of a European war, and argued that Britain's only prudent option was to ally itself with France against the Germans. A student ventured to disagree, saying that only 'inconceivable stupidity on

the part of statesmen' could precipitate a general conflagration. This provoked Wilson's derision: 'Haw! Haw! Haw!!! Inconceivable stupidity is just what you're going to get.' Lord Esher wrote later that Wilson returned his pupils to their formations 'with a sense of [war's] cataclysmic imminence'. Wilson was described by the prime minister to Venetia Stanley as 'that poisonous tho' clever ruffian', which seems about right. He was a shameless intriguer who meddled in everything, including offering support to the Ulster Protestants' threatened rebellion. But it was almost entirely his doing that the British Army had plans prepared to send a force to the continent – what was known as the 'W.F.' or 'With France' scheme.

In 1911, Wilson secured Grey's agreement that he should liaise with Britain's railway companies about a schedule for moving units to the ports in the event of war, and appropriate timetables were drawn up. At the end of July that year, Lloyd George made a speech at the Mansion House, placing Britain firmly beside France in any dispute with Germany, and Wilson became the foremost British instrument in preparing to implement such a commitment. In 1913 he visited France seven times, and in conversations with Joffre and his staff promised 150,000 men for the thirteenth day after mobilisation, to concentrate between Arras–Saint-Quentin and Cambrai ready for operations. This was fanciful, but a senior British officer thus created a military convention. Wilson argued that, though a BEF would be small, its moral contribution could be critical. He grossly underestimated prospective German strength. But, though then still only a brigadier-general, he exercised an extraordinary influence towards persuading Asquith to contemplate, though emphatically not to confirm, a continental military commitment. This seems to reflect a sense of statesmanlike prudence, rather than any taste for warmongering.

Meanwhile, at 1914 Anglo-Russian naval staff talks the British discussed providing support for a Russian landing in Pomerania. This was the sort of war-gaming all armed forces indulge in, but when news of it was leaked to Berlin by a Russian diplomat, German paranoia about the Entente was intensified. Unfortunately, the Pomeranian scheme lacked plausibility. The Royal Navy's preparation for Armageddon focused chiefly upon a blockade of which the diplomatic complications had been inadequately considered. Like all British war planning, it was limited in scale and incoherent in substance, lacking the political impetus to make it anything more. The continental nations expected to clash in arms sooner or later, which helped to ensure that they did so. The offshore islanders, however, thought it more plausible that they would soon be fighting each other.