I

Origins

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Introduction

While the immediate origins of the First World War are being analysed in the next chapter of this book, this one will examine the more long-term and deeper causes of what has rightly been called by George F. Kennan and others ‘the primordial catastrophe’ of the twentieth century.

In trying to identify these causes, historians have traditionally taken a chronological approach and written detailed narratives, some of which are very readable to this day; others are somewhat less riveting. The drawback of this approach is that, in light of the complexities of international politics and economics in the decades before 1914, readers could easily lose their way in the thickets of events and actors in the historical drama that ended in the outbreak of a world war in 1914.

The alternative is to take a thematic approach to the subject with individual sections devoted to one of the major issues of the time, such as European colonialism and imperialism, domestic politics, cultural developments and armaments. The advantage of this approach is its relatively greater clarity and accessibility. At the same time it is inevitably more difficult to provide a sense of the constant inter-relatedness of events. The best example of this approach is James Joll’s The Origins of the First World War.1 To be sure, Joll was too sophisticated a scholar to keep all his themes in a finely calibrated balance. Instead he raised the question of which of his various themes was, in his view, in the end the most important one. Although his rankings are not very explicit, he does highlight one theme that, he believes, is the key to an understanding of the war’s origins and deeper causes. He called this factor, discussed significantly enough at the very end of his book, ‘the mood of 1914’, and defines it as follows:

This mood can only be assessed approximately and impressionistically. The more we study it in detail, the more we see how it differed from country to country or from class to class. Yet at each level there was a willingness to risk or to accept war as a solution to a whole range of problems, political, social, international, to say nothing of war as apparently the only way of resisting a direct physical threat. It is these attitudes which made war possible; and it is still in an investigation of the mentalities of the rulers of Europe and their subjects that the explanation of the causes of the war will ultimately lie.²

This chapter is also very much concerned with ‘moods’ and mentalities and the bearing that these had on the outbreak of war in 1914. But it is socio-logically quite specific in that it focuses on the role of the military in the decision-making processes that led to war and relates it to the dynamics of one major factor, the pre-1914 arms race. This means that other factors relevant to the origins of the First World War will be discussed first before turning to the one that in my view must take first place in a ranking of causes. Organised like a funnel, it ultimately homes in on the key to understanding what happened in Europe in July and August 1914.

Industrialisation, demographic change and urbanisation

To grasp the highly dynamic developments that the societies of Europe underwent in the three or four decades before 1914, the impact of industrialisation, demography and urbanisation must be considered as major background factors. It is in this period that much of continental Europe experienced two Industrial Revolutions following closely upon each other. The first Industrial Revolution began in Britain in the eighteenth century, driven by the manufacture of soft weaving materials and textiles as well as by coal mining and iron-making. In the second half of the nineteenth century it was followed by what is generally termed the Second Industrial Revolution, characterised by the development of electrical and non-electrical engineering and chemicals. For both these revolutions it should also be remembered that production initially took place in quite small units, many of which began as craftsmen’s workshops. However, before the end of the nineteenth century there occurred a merger and concentration movement, resulting in the emergence of large corporations with hundreds and thousands of workers. And with their increased numbers

² Ibid., p. 196.
also came the rise of white-collar employees, white-coated scientists and the female white-blouse professions.

Secondly, from the eighteenth century Europe had also seen a very rapid population growth. Sooner or later, many men and women no longer found employment in agriculture, the mainstay of the pre-industrial economies. They began to move to regional or faraway towns, many of which grew into cities. In fact, there were many urban communities by the late nineteenth century that had trebled or quadrupled their populations within a decade. Most of the migrants who did not emigrate to North America, South America or Australia in those years, found employment in manufacturing industry, and although pay and work conditions were better than in agriculture that they had left behind, the levels of poverty were still shocking to contemporaries. With, on average, three or four children, many working-class families lived in very cramped apartment blocks, known as rental barracks. Medical and dental care was minimal and often unaffordable for blue-collar workers and their families. Charities were overburdened and underfunded. Unemployment benefits and social security programmes developed slowly in some European states, but were never adequate.

At the same time, industry and commerce created new wealth, promoting the rise of a well-to-do commercial and professional middle class, including white-collar employees. The growth of local regional and national bureaucracies and of systems of primary, secondary and tertiary education also provided better-paid and more secure jobs. The gap between the wealthy and the poor was particularly visible in residential segregation, dress and shopping habits. Accordingly, the industrial societies of pre-1914 Europe became more rigidly stratified in terms of socio-economic position and cultural habitus.

Political mobilisation and domestic politics

Since the political systems outside Eastern Europe had begun to open up and tried to integrate as citizens those who had been born into a particular nation-state, socio-economic conditions and divisions contributed to an awakening of a political consciousness, but this time not merely among the liberal bourgeoisie or the upper classes who tended to hold on to the positions of power they had gained within the state, but increasingly also among industrial workers. With the spread of suffrage systems and the rise of the printing press,! the lower classes, too, were able to articulate their hopes and expectations vis-à-vis their local and national governments. Like the middle and
upper classes, they founded political parties and associations to represent them in public.

Although many suffrage systems remained restricted and unfairly skewed against the working class, by the later nineteenth century there were a growing number of deputies in the local, regional and national assemblies who had been elected by those at the bottom of the pile. It did not take long for the other parties and classes to see them as a threat. It did not matter whether they were running a republic, like in Italy or France, or a constitutional monarchy; they all were faced with growing numbers of citizens living in the cities under conditions that were crying out for improvement. Perceiving a threat to the established order, politicians and bureaucrats relied on and refined several means by which they tried to stabilise political conditions. One of these was social appeasement, the attempt to satisfy the hopes and expectations of the working class with tangible concessions or promises of a better life in the future. But there was also reliance on the repressive power of the police and, as a last resort, on the army.

A third method was to mobilise nationalist feelings and to win over citizens by appealing to the integrating force of patriotism. There are two examples of how these processes worked in the 1880s under the French Republic led by Jules Ferry, on the one hand, and in the Prusso-German monarchy during the period of Reich Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, on the other. Both of them faced stiff opposition in the national parliament and were anxious to stabilise their support among the parties. National elections were coming up, Bismarck found himself in a situation similar to Ferry’s, who had successfully pushed back the monarchist opposition, whereas Bismarck had curbed the threat that the German Social Democrats posed to retaining his conservative majorities in the national parliament by outlawing their party, trade unions and related organisations.

Imperialism and colonialism

There was yet another device by which – so politicians calculated – patriotic pride and support for the national state could be fostered: the lure of expansion into overseas territories and the quest for a colonial empire. The British elites had already practised this policy by mobilising ‘working-class Tories’ who cheered the Empire that they had been told would bring both material and immaterial benefits to all Britons. Bismarck, the conservative Prussian landowner, was personally unenthusiastic about Germany joining the scramble for colonies that was in full swing in the final decades of the nineteenth
century. At the 1884 Congo Conference in Berlin, where the Great Powers discussed the distribution of territories in Africa, Leopold II, King of the Belgians, had been given for his personal exploitation the huge Congo Basin with its rich mineral resources.\(^3\)

Soon sceptical Bismarck began to change his tune, significantly enough just prior to the upcoming Reichstag elections. He was not concerned about a few German working-class Tories, if they existed at all, but about powerful interest groups among the commercial bourgeoisie who were clamouring for the acquisition of colonies. As the Reich Chancellor once put it rather cynically, he knew that the quest for colonies was a hoax but that he needed it for creating majorities that supported his government.\(^4\)

The notion that imperialism was a useful tool not only to respond to commercial pressures but also to divert and ease domestic tensions and to promise material gains for more than a few businessmen involved in international trade, had by the 1890s become popular among politicians and intellectuals all over Europe. In Britain, Cecil Rhodes, the tycoon, stated that

> my cherished idea is a solution for the social problem, i.e., in order to save the 40,000,000 inhabitants of the United Kingdom from a bloody civil war, we colonial statesmen must acquire new lands to settle the surplus population, to provide new markets for the goods produced by them in the factories and mines. The empire . . . is a bread and butter question. If you want to avoid civil war, you must become imperialists.\(^5\)

Alfred von Tirpitz, a German naval officer soon to become the naval secretary of Kaiser Wilhelm II, wrote in 1895: ‘In my view, Germany will in the coming century rapidly drop from her position as a great power unless we begin to develop our maritime interests energetically, systematically and without delay.’\(^6\) ‘This expansion, he added, was necessary ‘to no small degree also because the great patriotic task and the economic benefits to be derived from it will offer a strong palliative against educated and uneducated Social Democrats’. The importance of this factor to international politics and ultimately to the origins of the First World War may also be gauged from the statement by Enrico Corradini, an Italian intellectual who opined: ‘Social


imperialism was designed to draw all classes together in defence of the nation and empire and aimed to prove to the least well-to-do class that its interests were inseparable from those of the nation. It aimed at undermining the argument of the socialists and demonstrating that, contrary to the Marxist allegation, the workers had more to lose than their chains.7

As the jockeying for colonies continued among the Great Powers up to 1914, research also turned to studying the impact of European colonialism on the non-European world. While Ferry had claimed quite unabashedly that France was on a civilising mission that the Europeans had gone out to fulfill, scholars today are generally agreed that European colonialism brought few benefits to the colonised peoples and was by and large extremely destructive to local economies, social structures and cultural traditions. In Leopold’s Congo it is estimated that some 11 million indigenous men, women and children died either of diseases and malnutrition or through killing sprees that colonial troops perpetrated. It was no better in Asia where revolts, however insignificant, against the colonial masters were, like in Africa, brutally repressed. This has led students of imperialism to raise the question of what this massive violence in turn did to the European psyche. Some have gone so far as to see in this violence the precursors of the Nazi Holocaust of the Second World War. Others have had no hesitation to call, for example, Germany’s war against the Herero and Nama in colonial South West Africa a genocide. Isabel Hull, in her book Absolute Destruction, has argued that the violence practised in this war became part of German military culture.8 In other words, it became so deeply ingrained in the ethos of the officer corps that it came to see a future European war in the same terms of complete annihilation, a concept that will be discussed in more detail below.

The economies of pre-1914 European colonialism

Colonialism was dangerous and, indeed, self-defeating in the sense that it exacerbated economic tensions and rivalries that were inherent in the economic systems of an increasingly industrialised Europe. Economic constitutions were essentially capitalist and hence based on the principle of competition in the national and international marketplace. However, and as we have seen above, late-nineteenth-century colonialism was not an

7 Quoted in Tannenbaum, 1900: The Generation, p. 348.
exclusively private enterprise. National governments had made the conquest and possession of colonies their own project. They stationed troops abroad and sent bureaucrats to administer these territories. The trouble was that there were several international crises in the decade before 1914 that involved both European governments and certain business interests.

These crises in turn impacted on the trade among the Great Powers within Europe in which the United States had meanwhile also made an appearance. In the late nineteenth century America had witnessed a process of industrialisation and urbanisation at least as dramatic as that of Britain or Germany. By 1900, trade within the Anglo-American-German triangle had become very lucrative, although there had been a few diplomatic crises around 1900 when Britain and Germany appeared in Latin America and upset the US government that, pointing to the Monroe Doctrine, considered these European efforts an intrusion into its ‘backyard’. But by the mid decade, peaceful trade among the three nations and also in the rest of Europe had intensified. They were making direct investments by setting up agencies and subsidiaries. Some firms even built factories abroad. Other companies concluded patent agreements and other forms of cooperation. However, for reasons to be examined below, from around 1910 the business communities on both sides of the Atlantic became increasingly nervous about the international diplomatic and military situation. Before going into this topic, an analysis of cultural developments in Europe before 1914 provides yet another clue for understanding why the Great Powers ended up in the First World War.

European culture between optimism and pessimism

An evaluation of the press around New Year’s Day 1900 will reveal that the mood in most of Europe was overwhelmingly celebratory – with splendid fireworks and church bells ringing in the twentieth century. The nations looked back on a century that had not only brought industrialisation and urbanisation but also relative peace and prosperity. The wars that had taken place in mid century had been quite short. After the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 that had led to the founding of the German Empire, much further progress had been made, especially in the fields of science and technology. The achievements in the arts, humanities and social sciences had been no

less impressive. Conservative agrarian newspapers in Germany, it is true, were not quite so enthusiastic about the new century as was the bourgeois-liberal press. The agrarians warned of the growing threat that the industrial working class posed, thought to have fallen under the spell of Marxian socialism. Meanwhile British conservative papers wondered about the future viability of the Empire after the difficulties that the army had encountered during the war against the South African Boers.

Overall, though, European culture, broadly defined so as to include the sciences, education and popular culture, was divided into optimists and pessimists when it came to looking into the future. The optimists could be found among the professional middle classes and among the engineering and laboratory professions in particular. They confidently expected further breakthroughs and successes to emerge from the centres of research and learning in the universities, academies and Research & Development departments that the big corporations had added to their operations, especially in the chemical and electrical engineering branches. The cities that had come into wealth through rising tax revenues tackled the major task of building a modern infrastructure such as gas, electricity and water works, as well as sewage plants. They proudly also funded concert halls, theatres and opera houses as well as recreational parks, playgrounds and public swimming pools. The Arts and Crafts movement in Britain and the Werkbund in Germany became typical expressions of this optimism. There were also the architects who designed modern housing, garden cities and spacious and light factories. They were searching for an ‘international style’ that transcended national borders and experimented with new building materials such as glass and concrete. The transatlantic connections of these movements were embodied by American architects such as Frank Lloyd Wright, whose visions of modern housing left a deep impression on his European counterparts. Finally, there were the World Exhibitions that had started in London in 1851 and reached a high point at the Paris Exhibition in 1900, where the nations of the world presented themselves in their architectural tastes and the display of industrial machinery and artistic creations.

However, all the while there were also the cultural pessimists. They worried not merely about a political radicalisation of the ‘masses’ in the age of universal manhood suffrage. Nor was it just radical Marxists who believed that industrial capitalism and the bourgeois age were bound to collapse under the weight of their inner contradictions. There were also non-Marxist intellectuals and social critics who foresaw a period of conflict and instability. Among them was the German sociologist Max Weber who, while
acknowledging the wealth-creating and rational capacities of capitalism, nevertheless warned of the growth of large and ever more pervasive public and private organisations that promoted the bureaucratisation of the world. To him this trend was so powerful that he feared humanity would end up in what he called an ‘iron cage of serfdom’. It was a world in which the Fachmensch (expert) ruled from the top, regulating all aspects of individuals’ lives. Meanwhile in Vienna, Sigmund Freud probed the darker and irrational corners of the human soul.

Perhaps the most intriguing development in the field of European culture was a shift that took place in the arts. Classical music, theatre and painting had highlighted the uplifting aspects of human experience. Good invariably triumphed over evil. The stage was devoted to portraying such values as beauty, heroism and generosity. A new generation of artists now insisted that the mission of modern art was different; it confronted its audiences and viewers with the sordid and disharmonious sides of the human predicament. Soon realism was overtaken by expressionism, with its creations that reflected not what the eye captured in the real world but what an inner eye was making of it. Life to these artists appeared fragmented, de-centred, subjective. It was full of contradictions and disharmonies. For some cultural producers it was but a small step from these positions and their implicit or explicit criticism of the world to believing that European civilisation as a whole was rotten and heading towards the rocks.

Significantly, such predictions of the last days of mankind could most frequently be heard in Central Europe. A few intellectuals and artists even began to see its end in a huge cataclysm from which a thoroughly rejuvenated society would emerge, freed of its outmoded traditions and values and its stuffy bourgeois conformism. For orthodox Marxists, this cataclysm would come in the shape of a violent social revolution. For some artists who were not radical socialists, rejuvenation would come in a major war. In Germany, these pessimists received lateral support from more political popular writers such as Friedrich von Bernhardi, who in 1912 published his bestselling Germany and the Next War. But as 1914 drew closer there were also other voices. With tensions rising both inside the nations of Europe and in international politics, partly stimulated – as has been seen – by colonial rivalries, there were those who warned against just such a war. Among them was the Polish banker Ivan

10 For a very good digest of Weber’s ideas see Wolfgang J. Mommsen, The Age of Bureaucracy (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974).
Bloch, who published a six-volume study on *The Future of War in its Technical, Economic and Political Relations* as early as 1898 (Russian edition).\(^{12}\) It contained disturbingly accurate descriptions of what this war would be like, i.e., a mass slaughter of the kind that occurred for real in the trenches of the First World War. War between industrialised nations was for him tantamount to the destruction of civil and civilised society. In 1909 Bloch’s dire predictions were complemented by a bestseller written by another businessman, Norman Angell, entitled *The Great Illusion*.\(^{13}\) He postulated that with the rise of industry and peaceful commerce around the world the future was potentially bright. But it was threatened, at least for the time being, by militaristic and chauvinistic elements in modern society. Consequently, Angell became another writer to warn against the self-destructive danger that hovered over Europe. To him, major wars among Great Powers had become a loss for all participants, even for those who formally won, and the drain on resources would be so great that the region might never recover.

Looking at cultural developments in pre-1914 Europe, the situation had become curiously schizophrenic. On the one hand, large sections of the population and their intellectual and political leaders saw a bright future ahead. If to them the nineteenth century had been one of socio-economic, technological, political and human progress, the twentieth century would be no less one of further improvement and gradual reform. On the other side were the cultural pessimists whose numbers were growing towards 1914. They were sceptical of the viability of the liberal-capitalist societies of Europe. Some of them predicted not only a great upheaval but actively prepared it. The artists among them, though often unpolitical, also interpreted recent trends as harbingers of a huge crisis to come. While popular culture continued in its traditional tracks of folk festivals, folk music, folk art and folklore, analysts of high culture and avant-garde artists saw themselves as seismographs registering the early rumblings of an impending violent eruption that would bury European society. To be sure, none of the writers, painters or composers who celebrated disharmony, gloom and decadence had the power and influence to unleash the catastrophe that they predicted. It was army and naval officers who devoted their careers to the preparation of a major war and who would then unleash it in August 1914 with ferocious force.

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The German naval challenge to British hegemony

During the late nineteenth century, the Great Powers on the European continent eyed the armament policies of their rivals with much suspicion. Perhaps one of them would achieve military superiority and then use this advantage to start a preventive war. At the same time there was the question of naval armaments after the scramble for colonies had shifted the balance: now it was thought to be naval power that would determine the course of power relations in the twentieth century. Up to 1900 Britain had occupied the first rank by maintaining the Two-Power Standard, i.e., a navy large enough to be capable of confronting the next two strongest sea powers together and thus able to protect both the British homeland and her overseas possessions. In the 1890s, technological developments generated a debate among naval strategists. The orthodoxies of contemporary naval warfare envisioned prolonged raids by fast-moving cruisers against enemy ports and overseas settlements. Along came an alternative strategy that demanded the building of very large, slow battleships that would face their opponent in the European waters in a do-or-die battle.

By 1897, Tirpitz, by now the Kaiser’s naval secretary, had opted for the latter strategy. He was convinced that the only way to gain sufficient power-political leverage against Britain, the first sea power, was to expand the hitherto modest Imperial Navy into a major tool that could be used to wring territorial concessions from the British at the conference table when another ‘division of the world’ was being negotiated. However, should Britain not only refuse to make such concessions, but also steam across the North Sea to destroy the German battle fleet at Wilhelmshaven, the latter would be strong and well-trained enough to defeat the Royal Navy in a battle of annihilation. It is interesting how this idea of annihilation and total victory that had gained currency in the Prusso-German army inspired Tirpitz’s concept of a Vernichtungsschlacht in the North Sea. A victory would have shifted the international balance of power virtually in one afternoon. The German naval files contain the evidence for this preposterous idea that, according to the German historian Klaus Hildebrand, would have revolutionised the international system.

As Tirpitz explained to Wilhelm II in September 1899, ‘thanks to our geographic position, our system of military service, mobilization, torpedo boats, tactical training, organizational structure [and] our uniform leadership by the Monarch we shall no doubt have [a] good chance against England’. In another secret document, he added that all of Germany’s efforts should concentrate on the creation of a battle fleet ‘which alone will give us a maritime influence vis-à-vis England’. Of course, ‘the battle must first have taken place and have been won before one can think of exploiting it’. Indeed, ‘without a victorious battle’ the sea lanes to the Atlantic could not be kept open for Germany: “Victorious” is the decisive word. Hence let us concentrate our resources on this victory. ‘After all, ‘the bear’s skin’ could not be cut up ‘before the bear has been killed’.

After Wilhelm II, himself an enthusiast of German overseas expansion and naval power, had given his approval, Tirpitz and his fellow-officers in the Reich Navy Office began to implement a long-term building plan. They envisioned an expansion of the German battle fleet in several stages at the end of which Germany would have sixty big battleships, capable of defeating the Royal Navy. A file note of February 1900 assumed that the enlargement of the British fleet cannot proceed at the same rate as ours because the size of their fleet requires a considerably larger number of replacements. The [attached] table … demonstrates that England … will have to construct and replace a fleet almost three times as large as the German one as envisaged by the Navy Law [of 1900], if she expects to have an efficient fleet … in 1920 [!]. The inferior tonnage which our battle-fleet will continue to have vis-à-vis Britain’s shall be compensated for by particularly good training of our personnel and better tactical maneuverability of large battle formations. … The [enclosed] figures … on the tonnage which both battle fleets keep in service amount to a superiority of Germany. In view of the notorious difficulties in England to recruit enough personnel, it is unlikely that this favorable position will change.

These quotations should be telling enough about what was being planned in Berlin. By adopting a building tempo of three big ships per annum up to 1920, Tirpitz would not only have gained his sixty battleships, but would also have provided the German steel and shipbuilding industry with regular orders, protecting them against the vagaries of the market. A further

17 Ibid., pp. 50ff.
advantage was that the building tempo looked quite modest in its early stages and was therefore unlikely to alarm the Royal Navy. In other words, at the turn of the century Germany started a unilateral arms build-up against Britain, and Germany’s long-term ambition of defeating the Royal Navy had to be kept secret. Tirpitz was therefore very conscious of the need to keep this secret and of the ‘danger zone’, as he called it, that the Imperial Navy would be passing through. For, if London discovered the ultimate aims, it was likely that it would try to destroy the embryonic Imperial Navy in a coup reminiscent of the preventive strike Britain had launched against the Danish fleet in 1805 outside Copenhagen. To avoid such a ‘Copenhagening’, German diplomacy had to be aligned with the Tirpitz Plan, and indeed this is what Reich Chancellor Bernhard von Bülow tried to do after 1900.18

However, the future is always unpredictable and German diplomacy failed to give the necessary cover by keeping Germany aloof from international troubles. First, Britain began to wonder about the relentless building tempo across the Channel, and concluded the Entente Cordiale with France, Germany’s arch-enemy on the continent. It was not quite as solid as the Franco-Russian alliance treaty of 1893 that would involve Germany in a night-marish war on two fronts. But the Entente of 1904 rattled the German Foreign Office and caused it to test its firmness by challenging France in North Africa a year later. The Moroccan test proved to be a very bad miscalculation, and the international conference that followed left Germany without the gains she had expected. At exactly the same moment there arose an even greater threat to Tirpitz’s grand design, i.e., the decision of the British to begin building a much bigger battleship, the Dreadnought. Having observed German shipbuilding activity very closely, Sir John Fisher, the First Sea Lord, had been suspecting for some time that the Germans were up to something sinister and were hoping to win a veiled quantitative naval arms build-up. Fisher now escalated the competition by adding a qualitative dimension to it, i.e., by building ships with bigger displacements and bigger guns against which German ships had insufficient armour.19

When Tirpitz, unwilling to concede that his ambitious plan was failing, also began to build dreadnoughts, Fisher stepped up the building tempo. Against the three ships per annum envisaged by Tirpitz he decided to build four dreadnoughts per annum. Still refusing to give up, Tirpitz again followed suit.

19 See Volker R. Berghahn, Der Tirpitz-Plan (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1971), pp. 419ff.
But by 1908/9 it was becoming clear that he could not sustain this accelerated arms race in dreadnoughts. The additional costs were throwing the careful budgetary calculations on which the original plan had been based into disarray.

There are two telling statements that put the story of what happened in 1908/9 nicely into focus. The first one is by Lord Richard Haldane, a member of the Liberal Cabinet in London. The Liberals had won the elections of 1906 with promises of reducing the armament burdens through international negotiations at The Hague. The savings were to be used for a new social security and insurance programme to attract the votes of the British working class. Faced with the failure of the disarmament talks (largely because Germany refused to be part of any armament reduction) and with the need to fulfil election promises, the Liberal Cabinet decided to finance both stepped-up naval armaments and social programmes. As Haldane declared on 8 August 1908:20 ‘We should boldly take our stand on the facts and proclaim a policy of taking, mainly by direct taxation, such a toll from the increase and growth of this wealth as will enable us to provide for (1) the increasing costs of social reform, (2) national defence [and] (3) a margin in aid of the sinking fund.’ Knowing that the wealthy in Britain would not welcome higher direct taxes on their incomes, Haldane tapped into middle-class fears of the labour movement by adding that this policy ‘will commend itself to many timid people as a bulwark against the nationalisation of wealth’.

Meanwhile in Germany, Reich Chancellor Bülow was facing exactly the same dilemma. There were the increased costs of the dreadnoughts. At the same time, he continued to hope that increasing the social insurance benefits that Bismarck had first introduced in the 1880s would woo the industrial workers away from the Social Democrats and the Social Democratic trade unions. The SPD had greatly increased their votes in the 1903 national elections, but had lost seats in 1907, partly because of stepped-up nationalist agitation. Thanks to this agitation it had been relatively easy in the past to get enough Reichstag votes for increased naval armaments. However, when in a follow-up finance bill it came to distributing the costs of naval expansion onto different shoulders, the well-to-do, and the agrarians in particular, had rejected higher income and inheritance taxes. Instead they

voted for increased indirect taxes on food and other daily needs that disproportionately hit the lower-income groups. The medicine that Haldane prescribed for the British was therefore not available to Bülow. He was under pressure from the Conservatives and no higher direct taxes were in the end approved. The SPD having been kept out of the government and not having enough votes to reverse the trend, only had its press organs and speakers to protest against this unequal distribution of tax burdens imposed for military expenditures that they had been opposed to from the beginning. Their supporters, well aware of the rising cost of living in their weekly budget felt that these protests were perfectly justified.

It is against this background that Albert Ballin, the Hamburg shipping magnate and friend of Wilhelm II, made the other telling statement. He warned the Kaiser and his Reich Chancellor in July 1908 that ‘we cannot enter into a race in Dreadnoughts with the much wealthier British’.21 He might have added that the British did not have a system of taxation as unfair and conflict-ridden as that of Imperial Germany. Of course, Ballin was also opposed to a continuation of the Anglo-German naval arms race because he feared a further escalation of tensions that the building of battleships had already produced. A major war, he felt, would be a disaster for his shipping empire and for world trade, as indeed it turned out to be in 1914.

There was yet another and in this case very powerful group that began to get restive in the face of a costly naval arms race that Germany now increasingly looked like losing: the Prusso-German army. Partly in order to allow Tirpitz to have the first call on the Reich’s financial resources, but also because the top brass feared that an expansion of the army beyond its 1890s size would undermine the social exclusivity and reliability of the armed forces, the officer corps had decided at the turn of the century to refrain from submitting fresh increases to the size of the land forces. The existing shortage of officers of noble background was thought to undermine the esprit de corps if more men of bourgeois background had to be taken in. There was also the problem of a growing number of ordinary draftees who came from an urban working-class background and were suspected of having been influenced by socialist ideas. In the late 1890s, the army had initiated a programme of patriotic indoctrination to counter this threat. Soldiers were not allowed to frequent certain pubs in the vicinity of their barracks, and time and again their lockers were searched for socialist literature. In short, no more working-class recruits either.

The shift towards the pre-1914 European arms race on land

In 1907 Britain and Russia had settled their longstanding differences in Afghanistan, which had facilitated the formation of the Triple Entente of France, Britain and Russia. Thereupon the spectre of ‘encirclement’ took root in the thinking of the German general staff and of the Kaiser. The scales were finally tipping against further naval expenditures in favour of rearmament on land. This became very visible in the wake of the Second Moroccan Crisis of the summer 1911. This confrontation over North African territories further strengthened the determination of France and Britain to stand together. Berlin was forced into a humiliating retreat. As Helmuth von Moltke, the Chief of the general staff, wrote very angrily to his wife on 19 August 1911:

I am beginning to get sick and tired of this unhappy Moroccan affair... If we again slip away from this affair with our tail between our legs and if we cannot bring ourselves to put forward a determined claim which we are prepared to force through with the sword, I shall despair of the future of the German Empire. I shall then resign. But before handing in my resignation, I shall move to abolish the Army and to place ourselves under Japanese protectorate, we shall then be in a position to make money without interference and develop into ninnies.22

While these lines reflected the mood of this key army officer bluntly enough, the first signs of a revolt against the Imperial Navy could be detected as early as 1909. In March of that year, the influential and semi-official Militaerwochenblatt published an article with the title ‘Army in Chains’. By the summer of 1910 dissatisfaction had become so strong that Colonel Erich Ludendorff made the army’s case even more insistently: ‘Any state that is involved in a struggle for its survival must use, with utmost energy, all its forces and resources if it wants to live up to its highest duties.’23 The number of Germany’s enemies, he added, had now become ‘so great that it could become our inescapable duty’ to use ‘in certain cases’ and from the first moment every available soldier. Thenceforth everything depended ‘on our winning the first battles’.

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This evaluation is significant for two reasons. First of all, Ludendorff, himself of non-noble background, advocated dropping all limits on recruitment that had guided earlier policies of freezing the size of the army. Secondly, it indicated that sooner or later the general staff would insist on the introduction of a bill to enlarge the country’s land forces. Accordingly War Minister Josias von Heeringen, announced in November 1911 that the ‘political-strategic situation’ had ‘shifted to Germany’s disadvantage’. Appropriations for the army had to be increased without delay. Tirpitz immediately averred what was at stake: the army was to be used as the ‘battering ram’ against his naval plan. No less awkward for him was that the Reich Treasury had meanwhile collated figures to show that Germany could not afford both a powerful navy and an army large enough to face the Franco-Russian alliance. With the Treasury also putting its political weight behind a reorientation of the nation’s armaments policy, it was clear that Tirpitz had already lost the interdepartmental struggle that raged in Berlin in late 1911, and of course he had lost the naval competition against Britain that had thwarted his plan to out-build the Royal Navy. Meanwhile, subverted by Slav and particularly Serbian nationalist independence movements within its boundaries, Vienna was also getting more and more agitated.

Against the backdrop of these developments both within the structures of the imperial courts and the governments in Berlin and Vienna, it is no longer surprising that the army’s demand for 29,000 more soldiers and ‘manifold technical improvements’ became law very quickly in 1912. There were also enough Reichstag votes to approve the subsequent finance bills, but only with a good deal of manipulation and the appendix of the so-called Lex Bassermann-Erzberger, which required that the Reich government introduce before 30 April 1913 ‘a general property tax that takes account of the various forms of property’. By the winter of 1912/13 the debate over taxes that revolved around the same questions that Haldane had asked in Britain in 1908 was in full swing. By autumn 1912 a regional war had broken out in which the Balkan League of Bulgaria and Serbia (with Greece joining a few months later) challenged the possessions of the Ottoman Empire in Europe. The Ottoman Turks were soundly defeated, with Serbia gaining many of the territorial spoils of the League’s victory. After this the government in Vienna was even

24 See Berghahn, Germany and the Approach of War in 1914, pp. 126ff.
more alarmed about the future of its own position in the Balkans. In 1908 the Habsburgs had tried to bolster their territorial position by annexing Bosnia-Herzegovina. However, this move backfired because it angered the Russians who now saw themselves more than ever as the protectors of the Slavs in the Balkans.

The alarm spilled over into Berlin where the army was now drawing up plans for a second expansion of its land forces. As in the previous year, this bill was also passed by a Reichstag majority in a mood of determined patriotism. Again the funding question had been postponed. It was clear that more money had to be found, and there was also the Lex Bassermann-Erzberger of the previous year to be implemented. There is no space here to discuss the very complicated tax bill that, apart from the usual higher indirect taxes, this time did include, in the face of the fierce opposition of the Conservatives, an income tax, the Wehrbeitrag, though it was limited to one year.

In terms of the origins of the First World War, the more important development was the reaction of France and Russia. They promptly introduced army bills themselves so that the abandoned Anglo-German naval arms race was now being replaced by an even more dangerous military competition on land. Next to the push for the 1913 army bill, the German generals also reacted to the First Balkan War with a growing sense that a war was bound to break out soon. It seems that Wilhelm II, under the influence of his maison militaire, had been reaching a similar conclusion.

Thus, when he received news from London that the British position was also hardening towards his policies, the pressure was rising, also from Vienna, to launch an early war against Serbia in an effort to strengthen the position of Austria-Hungary against Slav nationalism. To the Kaiser the life-or-death question had been raised for his realm: “The eventual struggle for existence which the Germans (Austria, Germany) will have to fight in Europe against the Slavs (Russia) supported by the Romans (Gauls) will find the Anglo-Saxons on the side of the Slavs.” In pursuit of this strategic assessment, Wilhelm II called a conference with his top naval and army advisers on 8 December 1912. The monarch opened the discussions by urging that Austria should, without delay, take a stand against Serbia, lest she lost control over the Serbs

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29 Ibid.
inside the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. Moltke also took the view that a war was inevitable. The sooner it took place the better it would be. Tirpitz argued for a postponement by eighteen months because the widening of the Kiel Canal to allow for the movement of German dreadnoughts between the Baltic and the North Seas would not be completed before the summer of 1914. Moltke voiced his impatience at Tirpitz by interjecting that ‘the Navy would not be ready then either and the Army’s position would become less and less favourable’. The country’s enemies ‘were arming more rapidly than we do, as we were short of money’. In the end no decision to unleash a war was taken, not only because of Tirpitz’s opposition and the Kaiser’s vacillations, but also because it was found that the German ‘nation’ had not yet been sufficiently enlightened about the ‘great national interests’ that were at stake in the event of a war between Austria-Hungary and Serbia.

Preparing for a preventive war in 1914

This chapter began with an examination of the non-military factors that have to be studied when trying to understand the deeper origins of the First World War. Accordingly, we discussed industrialisation, demographic change, electoral politics, cultural optimism and cultural pessimism. However, the most dangerous development that pointed towards an outbreak of a major war was, after the collapse of Tirpitz’s naval ambitions to challenge Britain’s power, the incipient arms race on land between Russia and France on the one hand, and Germany and Austria-Hungary on the other. Moreover, the army professionals who, in the wake of these developments, had moved to the centres of decision-making in Berlin and Vienna, not only shared the gloomy sense that a great clash of arms would come in any case, but were also increasingly attracted by the concept of a preventive war. Not knowing the future, the generals became inclined to hit before it was too late and while victory still seemed possible. When the ‘mood of 1914’ is therefore invoked, it is important to remember that a preventive strike was very prevalent among the military in Berlin and Vienna.

There are two key documents that date from the spring of 1914 after the international and domestic situation in Germany and Austria-Hungary had deteriorated further in 1913. There is first of all an exchange that the Austrian Chief of the general staff, Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf, had with Colonel Josef Metzger, the head of the Operations Department. On this occasion, the former had been wondering aloud ‘if one should wait until France and Russia were prepared to invade us jointly or if it were more desirable to settle the
inevitable conflict at an earlier date’. He added that ‘the Slav question was becoming more and more difficult and dangerous for us’.

Having summarised his worries, in particular about the size of the Russian armament programme, in a memorandum to the German Foreign Office on 24 February 1914, Moltke decided to meet Conrad at Karlsbad in the middle of May. The meeting merely confirmed both of them in their conviction that time was running out. Moltke was by now firmly convinced that ‘to wait any longer meant a diminishing of our chances; as far as manpower was concerned, one cannot enter into a competition with Russia’. Upon his return to Berlin, Moltke went to see Foreign Secretary Gottlieb von Jagow, who made the following record of the meeting:

The prospects of the future seriously worried him [Moltke]. Russia will have completed her armaments in 2 to 3 years. The military superiority of our enemies would be so great then that he did not know how we might cope with them. Now we could still be more or less a match for them. In his view, there was no alternative to waging a preventive war in order to defeat the enemy as long as we could still more or less pass the test. The Chief of the general staff left it at my discretion to gear our policy to an early unleashing of a war.31

In all these discussions the industrial and commercial elites of Europe played no active part and most of them were nervous onlookers. They knew that a major war would not only have terrible consequences for their own businesses, but also for the region and its populations as a whole. This is why some of them with connections to the inner political circles tried to dissuade the two emperors from using their exclusive constitutional right to declare a war. In the end, they were sidelined and this also applied to the business communities in France and Britain, once the German invasion of Belgium and France had begun.32

The ‘masses’ of ordinary Europeans, many of whom were organised by 1914 into large socialist parties and trade unions, found themselves in a similar situation. Their leaders, though not privy to government thinking, had an inkling of what would happen if several industrial powers clashed, that were

31 Quoted in Fischer, Krieg der Illusionen, p. 584.
now so frantically arming themselves to the teeth irrespective of the financial costs. They sensed that there would be a blood bath, in which their own members would be the first victims. As the threat of war loomed larger following the armament bills, the leaders of the European left made desperate efforts to stop the march towards the abyss. Jean Jaurès, the French socialist leader, sent out a call to hold a congress of the Second International in Brussels. On 31 July he was shot and killed by a right-wing nationalist fanatic. Meanwhile, after the delivery of the Austro-Hungarian ultimatum to Serbia on 23 July 1914, the German Social Democrats, fearing the outbreak of war, held demonstrations in major cities to warn Vienna against an invasion of Serbia.33

These demonstrations made Reich Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg realise that Germany could not possibly join an Austro-Hungarian war, unless the population could be convinced that they were being called up to defend the fatherland against the autocratic tsarist juggernaut. He promptly initiated negotiations with moderate SPD leaders to obtain their support if the country found itself in a defensive war against Russia. This explains why the Kaiser waited for Russia to announce her mobilisation order first. When the deadline of the German ultimatum to rescind the order passed without a Russian response, Wilhelm II proclaimed Germany’s mobilisation. But instead of moving against the Tsarist Empire, Moltke invaded France and Belgium as envisaged by a revised Schlieffen Plan. It was his only option. All Eastern operations’ plans had been dropped in previous years. Still there was great relief once the trains had been ordered to roll West. As Georg Alexander von Mueller, the Chief of the Naval Cabinet, recorded in his diary on 1 August 1914: ‘Brilliant mood. The government has succeeded very well in making us appear as the attacked.’34

As these developments put the two monarchs and the military entourage so glaringly into the limelight, we must take a final look at their ‘mood’, also in order to build a bridge to the next chapter that will discuss the last weeks and days of peace in greater detail, including the question of whether Berlin and Vienna thought at first in terms of a localisation of the conflict to the Balkans or whether, as Fritz Fischer has argued, the Reich government and

the military aimed at an all-out war from early July onwards. The issue on which to conclude this chapter is therefore what Lancelot Farrar has called ‘The Short War Illusion’. To understand this phenomenon, the warnings of Helmuth von Moltke the Elder, the uncle of the namesake who in 1 August 1914 got the Kaiser to order the attack in the West, are highly germane. Pondering in his years of retirement the lessons of the Franco-Prussian War in which he had led Prussia to victory against Napoleon III, he came to the conclusion that a future war could no longer be fought among the Great Powers of Europe. Such a war, he was convinced, would be a Volkskrieg, a people’s war, that no belligerent could hope to win. Everything should therefore be done to avoid a major European war.

The problem was that if this insight of an old war horse had been followed by his successors it would have made large armies and the planning of a major war superfluous. Although his nephew and his comrades never openly refuted Moltke the Elder’s wisdom, it seems that for their own profession’s sake they wanted to make great wars fightable and winnable again. Hence they adopted Schlieffen’s idea of annihilation and added to it the notion of a lightning war. Brutal attack, swift advances into enemy territory and total defeat within weeks had become the way out of the military-professional dilemma that they faced in the era of People’s Wars. This explains the illusory claim that circulated among the soldiers on the Western Front, that victory would be achieved within months and that they would be home again by Christmas 1914. It is against the background of the feeling that a preventive war could be won by the Central Powers that a fatal decision was taken by a few men in Berlin and Vienna that pushed Europe over the brink. This means that there is no need for scholars to go on a roundtrip through the capitals of Europe with the aim of finding out that other decision-makers were more responsible for the First World War than the two emperors and their advisers. Berlin and Vienna continue to be the best places for historians to look closely for clues as to why war broke out in 1914.

35 Fritz Fischer, Griff nach der Weltmacht: Die Kriegszielpolitik des Kaiserlichen Deutschland (1914–1918) (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1964 [1961]).
38 Many years ago L. F. C. Turner, The Origins of the First World War (London: Edward Arnold, 1970), held Russia primarily responsible for the outbreak of war in July/August 1914. This argument has most recently been taken up again by Sean McMeekin, The Russian Origins of the First World War (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011). The most recent work (2013) that also raises the question of Russian responsibility is Christopher Clark’s The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914 (New York: HarperCollins, 2012). Clark also examines the role of Serbia and her ambitions in the
There is also likely to be more work on the so-called ‘unspoken assumptions’ – a notion that T. G. Otte has revived with reference to the attitudes and mentalities prevailing in the British Foreign Office before 1914 below the top ministerial and Cabinet level.39 This chapter, it is true, has focused on the ‘outspoken assumptions’ that flowed from the mentalities, dispositions and decision-making processes in Berlin and Vienna. While often but opaquely articulated perceptions and assumptions of international politics are no doubt worth exploring, the moves of Sir Edward Grey in London, through which the decision to go to war was delayed until 4 August, were largely imposed by the split in the British Cabinet about whether to enter the war at all. Only when it became absolutely clear that the main thrust of the German invasion was head on through Belgium and not further south against France, was he able to sway his Cabinet colleagues. Like London, Paris similarly took a more ‘attentiste’ position and not the proactive one of the decision-makers in Berlin and Vienna.

There can be little doubt that the debate is likely to continue on what share of the responsibility not only Russia, but also the other powers have to bear in the origins of the First World War. However, as this chapter has been arguing, these shares will be secondary in comparison to the aggressive diplomacy and armament policies that the German monarchy, with Vienna increasingly in its wake, pursued from the turn of the century, and that for the reasons examined here, culminated in the idea of the Central Powers launching a preventive war in 1914.