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Debates over the causes of World War I have persisted for years, but despite varying interpretations, the aims and methods of the Imperial German Government have long been a central focus for study. The successors to Bismarck, who together with Kaiser Wilhelm must accept much of the blame for precipitating the conflict, failed to understand the fundamentals of diplomacy which the Iron Chancellor had so completely personified and thereby led Germany to war under the worst possible circumstances. Their failure to delineate clearly German national interests, avoid unnecessarily challenging the national interests of others, and understand all aspects of national power and its limitations condemned the German leadership to failure well before 1914.

**THE QUESTION OF NATIONAL INTEREST
IN IMPERIAL GERMAN FOREIGN POLICY:
Bismarck, William II, and the Road to World War I**

A lecture given for the Strategy Curriculum on 5 March 1973

by

Professor Norman Rich

A distinguished American historian has said of Bismarck that he was "one of the first great European statesman of the nineteenth century who consciously and deliberately subordinated every ideal to the needs of the states. . . . Reason of state was his master, to be served with all his powers, by fair means or foul."¹ This is probably an accurate description of Bismarck's attitude toward politics, though whether his emphasis on reason of state was as novel in the 19th, or any other, century as this passage suggests is open to question. For surely even those leaders who profess to be guided by higher values, whether these be God, liberty, democracy, or even Nordic supremacy or the dictatorship of the proletariat, are generally convinced that they are acting in

the interests of the state. The essence of the problem, of course, is not reason of state in itself, but what a statesman considers reason of state to be, and it is here that the most profound criticisms of Bismarck can be, and have been, made.

In a brief analysis of foreign policy, it is impossible to deal adequately with this crucial aspect of Bismarck's statecraft except to suggest that he was too much the egotist and too practical a politician to subscribe to the views of his more pedantic compatriots that the state was, or could be, an end in itself. The state might be his creation and the instrument of his personal power, but he was well aware that there was no line of demarcation between the welfare of the state and that of its people, that a

state had responsibilities toward its citizens just as much as citizens had responsibilities toward their state.

The point should be emphasized that Bismarck's conception of reason of state did not automatically exclude considerations of right and wrong, humanity, truth, or justice, as some of his critics have maintained, if only because he understood how important moral forces could be in political life. The moral issue, however, went beyond mere political expediency. If the state had responsibility toward its citizens, so too did the statesman. Morality, Bismarck once said, was not an abstract conception standing outside political reality, but stemmed from within it and was expressed in a statesman's sense of moral responsibility for his actions. A sense of responsibility, then, was for Bismarck an integral part of reason of state.

It was on the basis of this combination of reason of state and moral responsibility, as he conceived them, that Bismarck selected his political aims.

A judicious selection of political aims is undoubtedly the most important task of any statesman, particularly in the field of foreign policy. How well that choice is made depends, of course, on the ability of the statesman in question or on the ability of the persons from whom he accepts advice. Bismarck himself insisted that politics was not a science but an art; it was not something that could be learned; one had to have a flair for it. In this judgment he was at least partially right. There is no substitute for talent.

The "flair" qualities of Bismarck's own statecraft, those talents that cannot be learned or copied, have often been enumerated: his ability to see the essential feature in a political situation; his timing, sense of proportion, fertility in expedients; his restraint combined with the instinct to choose the right moment to act.

He possessed other qualities, how-

ever, which did not necessarily depend on genius, qualities which had nothing to do with political virtuosity and which might be described as the fundamentals of diplomacy. These fundamentals played a greater role in Bismarck's diplomacy after 1871 than the flair he employed to such effect during the activist period of unification. The most important of these stemmed from his concern with reason of state and moral responsibility and amounted to an awareness that the first task of a statesman must be to consider carefully and dispassionately what were, in fact, the vital interests of the state, to keep these always in the forefront of his political thinking, and to steer a political course accordingly. To make an accurate appraisal of national interests in itself demanded political judgment and insight of a high order, but even more it required a conscious effort to overcome prejudices and preconceptions, to put aside empty considerations of prestige or the temptation to score minor victories at the expense of major interests. It meant having the self-confidence to adhere to a political course despite criticism and temporary political fluctuations; but it also meant having the courage to face up to errors in judgment and rectify mistakes and the mental resiliency to readjust ideas and policies when basic political changes were taking place. These qualities were in no way natural to a man of Bismarck's passionate and egotistic temperament, but his great strength lay in his recognition of the need for them and his disciplined effort to overcome weaknesses in his own character so as to live up to his own sense of moral responsibility.

Some critics have faulted Bismarck for his willingness to shift political direction, and adjust his policies to changing situations. On this score they have charged that Bismarck lacked principle. Bismarck's principle, however, was Germany's national interest. If the national interest was thereby served, he

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was willing to negotiate and conclude agreements with any state, any political force, or any person, no matter how great his previous hostility or prejudice against them had been.

Whether Bismarck's selection of political aims was sound, whether his consequent policies were necessary, desirable, or effective are questions that will be debated as long as history is studied. In the name of reason of state he accepted responsibility for the deaths of those who had fought in the wars of German unification; he sought to acquire a better strategic frontier for the state by annexing Alsace and Lorraine, thereby incurring the permanent hostility of France; he strove to eliminate subversive elements within the state by conducting vicious campaigns against the Poles, Catholics, and Socialists; and he ruined the life of Harry Arnim for undermining official policies.

Also for reason of state, however, he swallowed defeat at the hands of the Catholics and sought to regain their support for the state once the Catholic party had proved itself to be a stable political force; he quashed the love affair of the Princess of Prussia with Prince Alexander of Bulgaria because it might injure Germany's relations with Russia; he rejected appeals to come to the aid of stricken humanity in other parts of the world because he considered it irresponsible and dangerous to interfere in the affairs of other states when German national interests were not involved; and he ruthlessly suppressed military and chauvinist agitation to wage preventive war or to resume the paths of conquest. So long as he was Chancellor, Bismarck would never condone a preventive war; war was the *ultima ratio*, to be waged only when the most vital interests of the state were at stake. In his great Reichstag speech of 6 February 1888, he publicly denounced chauvinist agitators:

Every great power which seeks to

impose itself upon and influence

the policy of other countries and to take the lead in areas outside its own sphere of interest is operating outside the area God assigned to it; it is conducting power politics, not the politics of self-interest; it is guided by motives of prestige.

Quite as important as Bismarck's attempt to identify German national interests was his corresponding attempt to understand the national interests of other great powers, an exercise that often gave him a clearer conception of the political possibilities and requirements of another state than that country's own leaders. This practice saved him from the most common of diplomatic pitfalls, the pursuit of a policy which ran counter to the basic interests of another great power and thus pushed that power into the camp of his country's enemies. It was also the essential feature of one of his most effective diplomatic techniques, that of maneuvering other powers to defend their own national interests when these happened to coincide with the national interests of Germany.

At the center of Bismarck's evaluation of national interests was the problem of power, which his critics have often equated with military power and the use of force. The army, of course, played a crucial part in his political calculations, but for him the army was at all times a tool, not an end in itself. Far from furthering the army's position as a state within a state, he kept it under rigid political control and successfully warded off the attempts of army leaders to bring state policy into line with military requirements.

Bismarck never lost sight of the fact that a state's power depended on far more than military power, economic power, or similar material assets, important as these might be. Power depended on the wisdom of a state's leadership, on the morale of its people. Power depended on a state's relations with

other states, on the strength of its alliances and the weakness of the alliances of its opponents. And, in a very significant way, power depended on a state's moral position, on its ability to claim that its critical diplomatic or military actions were taken in accordance with or in defense of that body of international treaties and conventions known as international law. Only from a strong moral position could a state appeal effectively to world or even to its own public opinion in time of crisis.

Bismarck's broad conception of the quality of power necessarily made him aware of the limits of power, both his own and that of the state he governed. It was this awareness that made him recognize the impossibility of further conquest and the futility of preventive war as a means of enhancing German security after 1871. Any German attempt to expand by force or to crush potential enemies would be certain to result in the formation of a European coalition which Germany could never hope to defeat.

These were among the considerations that determined Bismarck's selection of both the aims and methods of German foreign policy after 1871. His aim was the security of the state, which may indeed have been his basic objective since 1862. Only now, instead of trying to achieve security by broadening the base of Prussian power, he sought to do so by consolidating the gains he had made and by maintaining the status quo. Germany, he believed, was a satiated state which had little to gain and a great deal to lose by further territorial changes in Europe. As such changes could only be brought about by violent means, the most reliable method of safeguarding German security would be to keep the peace.

Peace, however, did not depend on Germany alone. In international affairs the satisfaction of one power is generally accompanied by the dissatisfaction of others. The unification of Germany

under Prussia had frustrated the interests of several powers, so that from the moment of its creation the new German Empire faced the hostility of those powers. While no continental European state had ever been immune to external threats, Bismarck's empire seemed far more capable of meeting them than the former state of Prussia or, indeed, any other German political organization of the past.

Bismarck saw no reason to fear any one of the great powers of Europe. It was the formation of a hostile coalition that he dreaded. The prevention of such a coalition therefore became the primary objective of his diplomacy. His method for achieving this objective was the most obvious one: to prevent the formation of hostile coalitions, he sought to form coalitions of his own. Bismarck's diplomatic axiom of seeking to be *à trois* in a world of five great powers has often been quoted, but his entire conduct of diplomacy suggests that he would have preferred more than anything else to be *à cinq*. As this was impossible owing to the hostility of France, he worked hard and on the whole successfully to be *à quatre*. This policy was at least in part the result of his recognition that Germany's relations with each of the great powers was closely connected with or even dependent upon her relations with all the others.

In seeking to retain the friendship of Austria, for instance, Germany was repeatedly faced with the demand to support Austrian national interests in Eastern Europe against Russia. As Bismarck had no desire to involve Germany in the disputes in Eastern Europe or to be blackmailed into fighting Austria's wars, he sought to maintain close diplomatic ties with Russia as well as Austria.

The greatest difficulty in winning the friendship of Russia was that many Russians believed Bismarck was supporting Austria against Russia, whatever he might say to the contrary, and that

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an alliance with France, the enemy of Germany, would be more profitable than one with Germany, the friend of Austria. Bismarck's only means for countering this belief was to convince the Russians that German friendship was more valuable and her hostility more detrimental to Russia's national interests than any advantage a French alliance could offer. To do this he not only proclaimed Germany's disinterestedness in Eastern Europe, but gave the Russians assurances of substantial support in that area. At the same time he allowed them to know that if they did ally themselves with France, Germany's only recourse would be an alliance—and no longer necessarily only a defensive alliance—with Russia's principal enemies, Austria and Britain, a grouping which would certainly attract Turkey and various Balkan States. Against such a combination, Russia, even with French support, would be powerless.

To make this threat convincing it was essential that Germany maintain good relations with Britain, but Bismarck needed more than good relations with Britain. It was all very well to declare German disinterestedness in Eastern Europe and to promise the Russians support there, but if Austria were to be preserved as a great power, she could not be left to defend her interests against Russia alone. Thus, it was necessary to secure support for Austria, and the most natural source of such support was Britain. The British had fought the Crimean War to keep Russia out of Constantinople and the Mediterranean, and their interest in the Near East had, if anything, increased since they had acquired control of the Suez Canal in 1875. So long as the British believed that Germany would support Austria against any Russian threat to vital Austrian interests, they could afford to stand aside and allow the Teutonic powers to stop Russia for them. By maintaining a German alliance with Russia, however, and by constantly re-

stating that the fate of the Balkans and Constantinople in no way affected German national interests, Bismarck convinced the British that if they wished to keep Russia out of the Mediterranean they would have to assist in this task themselves. The German alliance with Russia was thus Bismarck's main lever to pry diplomatic commitments out of Britain.

Bismarck's game was a particularly delicate one, especially since he could not afford to expose the extent of Germany's dependence on any of the great powers. To camouflage this condition, he indulged in occasional demonstrations of hostility toward them all, always taking care to keep open his bridges for the restoration of amicable relations.

The policy of being *à quatre* was not only valuable in preventing the formation of hostile coalitions, but it also allowed Bismarck to exercise some measure of supervision and control over the relations of his diplomatic partners to each other. Such supervision was important, for Bismarck not only wanted Germany to remain at peace, he wanted Europe, or at least the great powers of Europe, to remain at peace. Any major European war was certain to involve Germany, and the possibilities of advancing Germany's national interests in such a war were in no way proportionate to its hazards. By maintaining close diplomatic relations with the major powers, Bismarck was in a position to use his influence to prevent conflict between them. His system of alliances was thus one of his methods for preserving the peace.

The effectiveness of Bismarck's alliances as a method of preserving peace has often been questioned. There is a school of thought which maintains that secret alliances, far from preserving peace, are a major cause of war. Bismarck's alliances have been considered particularly sinister because of the devious tactics he used to create them

and the dubious honesty of their occasionally contradictory terms. The peace of Europe, his severest critics contend, was preserved as much in spite of as because of Bismarck, and they offer the irrefutable evidence that peace continued almost a quarter of a century after his dismissal.

The peace of Europe was indeed preserved after Bismarck's dismissal, but that peace depended to a large extent on the successful operation of the balance of power, a precarious system at best, whose effectiveness during this particular period was due in no small measure to the diversion of great power rivalries outside Europe. Even then it was something of a miracle that a European war did not break out long before 1914. Bismarck, whatever else may be said for or against his policies, did at least try to impose some form of control and order on the European states system, to find more reliable guarantees for peace, and to make its preservation less dependent on the questionable good sense or goodwill of the statesmen who govern our destinies.

In a recent study of Bismarck, the British historian Professor Medicott cites with evident approval Gladstone's belief that the rivalries on the Continent could be neutralized and dissolved in the warm comradeship of a revived concert of Europe, and he condemns Bismarck for regarding Gladstone's opinions as both silly and perverse.² Professor Medicott fails to mention, however, that a revival of the concert of Europe—not a liberal Gladstonian concert, to be sure, but an antirevolutionary conservative concert—was precisely what Bismarck sought to achieve through those loose agreements known as the First Three Emperors' League. This revival of a quasi-Metternichian system for maintaining the political and territorial status quo, and with it the peace of Europe, proved unable to cope with the first serious problem it encountered and was shattered in the Near

Eastern crisis of 1876-78.

Bismarck's subsequent creation of a new European alliance system is one of the best known chapters of European diplomatic history, yet it is surprising how few British or American surveys of the period, or even specialized studies, have followed the lead of Professor Langer in pointing out the unique quality of this system as it had developed by 1887 or in analyzing (whether favorably or unfavorably) its effectiveness as a mechanism for preserving peace.³

Bismarck's system was no revival of the balance of power or a balance of tensions, as it has sometimes been described. On the contrary, instead of dividing the powers of Europe into two hostile camps, which is the general result of the free operation of the balance of power, Bismarck brought them all, with the exception of France—and he tried hard to include France—into an interlocking network in which no single power would be assured of support in a war of aggression, preventive war, or in any aggressive gamble. If such a gamble were attempted, the aggressive power would find itself facing an overwhelming defensive coalition, either as a result of actual alliance treaties or of natural alliances that might be expected to form.

International agreements as such were unreliable instruments, as Bismarck well knew, but the strength of his treaties lay in the fact that they were all sufficiently advantageous to the powers concerned to give those powers a vested interest in adhering to them. The treaties were also sufficiently limited in time to prevent any power from growing restive under the terms of a particular agreement. When the time limit was up the treaty would lapse, or it could be negotiated anew in accord with changes in the international situation, for no power liked to be left without assurances of defensive support of some kind.

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The Bismarckian system was not foolproof—no human institution is—but it was one of the most ingenious instruments for preserving peace in the anarchic world of sovereign states that has ever been devised.

Bismarck himself was well aware that his system offered no permanent solution to the problem of international anarchy and that a constant readjustment of methods and ideas was required to meet changing political situations. Nothing in the world was permanent, he once said, neither peace treaties nor laws. A statesman could do no more than try to do his duty. Everything else was up to God.

This failure of Bismarck to offer Germany and Europe a permanent solution or an easily applied formula for international problems is deplored even by his admirers. His alliance system, they complain, was so complicated that it required a political genius to operate it. Perhaps this is true, and perhaps Bismarck himself would have found it unworkable if he had remained in office a few years longer. Nevertheless, the success of Bismarck's diplomacy—and I think it was on the whole successful—did not depend on any system but on his qualities as a diplomat. Of these the most important was not his genius but his attention to what was described earlier as the fundamentals of diplomacy: a dispassionate evaluation of national interests; care to avoid challenging the national interests of other great powers; and an awareness of the quality of national power and its limitations. It was the neglect of these fundamentals which, more than anything else, brought disaster to his successors, as indeed it brings disaster to most statesmen who disregard them.

Bismarck, of course, had the advantage of exercising exclusive control over the formation and execution of German foreign policy, a control which ensured unified direction of policy. Under his successors, this unified direction, too,

was lacking.

Emperor William II had both the right and the power to control German foreign policy, but among his many deficiencies he lacked the necessary capacity for work to carry this immense burden. Although he intervened decisively in affairs of state whenever events or mood prompted him, a large part of the responsibility for the formulation and execution of policy passed by default to the officials of his Foreign Office. Among these officials were intelligent and dedicated men, but the great weakness they all shared with the Emperor was their failure to concentrate on the problem of Germany's national interests and to consider all their policies in the light of those interests. So frequently were considerations of pride, prejudice, and prestige allowed to determine their political course that it often seemed as though *raison d'état* had been displaced by *raison de moi*.

Other forces, too, now began to exercise increasing influence on the conduct of German foreign policy. Courtiers, military leaders, and businessmen who had the support of the Emperor, well-organized and well-financed pressure groups like the Navy League and the Colonial Society, and a variety of other social and economic interests began to bring pressure on the Government which Bismarck's less powerful successors were unable to ignore. Perhaps the greatest problem faced by Bismarck's successors was the need to cope with these extra-Government forces, which the old Chancellor himself had only held in check with difficulty. Foremost among the beliefs held by these pressure groups was that Germany was not, as Bismarck had held, a satisfied state. German disunity, they argued, had prevented her in the past from acquiring her fair share of the world's spoils, but that disability had long since been overcome, and it was high time that Germany should take her place beside Britain, France, and Russia,

as a world, not just a European, power.

The German desire for empire was understandable enough in this heyday of European imperialism, and it may have been impossible for any German Government to disregard the pressures of public opinion on this issue. The error in Germany's quest for empire was not so much the quest itself, but the means by which this policy was conducted. Neither in the Foreign Office nor in any other Government department was a conscious effort made to determine where Germany might expand with maximum benefit to her national interests and minimum conflict with the interests of those states with which she hoped to maintain friendly relations. There were members of the imperial Government who knew as well as Bismarck that Germany's vital interests lay in Europe and that the maintenance of a strong diplomatic position on the continent had to take precedence over imperial ambitions. Although these men were in charge of German policy for extended periods, their policies could at any time be contravened by the Emperor or by officials appointed by him to do his bidding. Unfortunately for Germany, this Emperor gave way to every whim and pursued a variety of ill-conceived and contradictory imperialist objectives which were to bring Germany into conflict with every other great power in the world.

This problem was not evident immediately. During the first years of his independent reign, William was content to move cautiously and leave most foreign policy decisions in the hands of his professional diplomats. In fact, in these years the Emperor and his diplomats were in substantial agreement as to the kind of foreign policy Germany should pursue. They wanted to put an end to the complications, the apparent dishonesties and inconsistencies of Bismarck's system, in order to follow a straightforward, honorable course to

show friend and foe alike where Germany stood.

Instead of Bismarck's involved alliance system, they proposed to construct a coalition of Europe's peace-loving powers—by which they meant themselves, Britain, and Austria—which could then dictate terms to the perennial disturbers of the peace, France and Russia. They were especially critical of Bismarck's alliance with Russia, which they considered both useless and a threat to Germany's harmonious relations with her real friends. In accordance with these ideas, the first moves of Bismarck's successors were to drop the alliance with Russia and to begin an ostentatious courtship of Britain.

The dropping of the treaty with Russia left Russia isolated and virtually forced her into an alliance with France. German diplomats were undoubtedly correct in believing that Russia was an undependable ally and that in the event of war she probably would side with France no matter what her treaty relationship with Germany might be. But they neglected to consider the enormous difference between an international situation in which Russia was linked to Germany, no matter how unreliably, and one in which Russia was definitely linked to France. As long as France was not absolutely certain of Russian support, she was not likely to risk a conflict with Germany. Once a solid Franco-Russian alliance had been formed, however, chauvinists in either country might be tempted to exploit it.

German diplomats also neglected to consider the effect that severing the link with Russia would have on their other allies. Once Germany had dropped Russia and taken her stand unequivocally at the side of Austria, Britain could safely withdraw from commitments in Central Europe, confident that Germany would now assume the tire-some responsibility of defending not only the Habsburg monarchy itself, but what seemed to be Austria's vital in-

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terests in the Balkans and the Near East. By cutting Russia adrift, they had thrown away Germany's most effective diplomatic weapon for dealing with Britain. The change also left Germany in a weaker position vis-a-vis her remaining allies, for both Austria and Italy, now that Germany had made herself dependent on their support, were able to demand more for their friendship by threatening to defect to the Franco-Russian camp. This weakness was to grow increasingly obvious as the years passed and was to prove catastrophic in 1914.

German statesmen were annoyed by the growing independence and unreliability of Austria and Italy, but their greatest anger was directed against Britain, which did not leap at the suggestion of an alliance with the new, honorable German Government.

What the Germans forgot was that the British, who had fought for centuries to prevent the domination of the Continent by a single state and the consequent disruption of the European balance of power, were hardly likely to support a German diplomatic campaign for achieving this object. An Anglo-German diplomatic partnership would have cemented the Triple Alliance, it would have drawn Turkey and the smaller Balkan States into its orbit. In a power grouping of this kind, Germany, as the greatest military power in the system, would have been in a position to call the political tune, and the British had no desire to aid Germany in acquiring such a position. When the British made their famous bids for a German alliance at the turn of the century, it was to seek German aid against Russia in the Far East and to prevent the formation of a hostile coalition during the Boer War. Even then, however, they never made offers which the Germans considered adequate.

The Germans were not immediately conscious of the weakness of their international position after 1890 be-

cause the rivalry of the European powers was temporarily diverted to areas outside Europe, where Britain bore the brunt of international hostility. Intense as were these imperial rivalries, they never proved serious enough to provoke war between the European powers as the Germans confidently expected. They were not even sufficiently serious to force one of these powers to seek an alliance with Germany on German terms.

A wise German policy at this time would have been to sit tight, maintain cordial relations (if not treaty relationships) with all powers, and to develop German strength and influence through trade and economic expansion. Such a policy, however, was not positive enough for the professional diplomats of the German Foreign Office or spectacular enough for the German Emperor or German public opinion. In the Foreign Office, frustration over the failure to gain a diplomatic alignment with Britain brought about a belated recognition of the importance of Russia as a lever to pry commitments out of Britain, and periodically strenuous efforts were made to restore closer diplomatic relations with the Tsarist Empire—efforts which only convinced the Russians of the beneficent results of their alliance with France. This was not, strictly speaking, a zigzag policy but part of a desperate search for means of applying pressure on the British to convince them, if not of the desirability, then of the necessity, of German friendship. The Germans were to pursue this policy not only through courtship of Russia, but by supporting all powers upon occasion, including France, in disputes with Britain and by engaging in some vicious disputes with Britain on their own.

Thus the German Foreign Office officials, whose main objective was an alliance with Britain, did much to undermine their own policy. The policy was undermined further by the Em-

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peror's colonial ventures, especially by his ostentatious meddling in South Africa. It was finally scuttled beyond hope by the Emperor's fleet-building program.

The Emperor argued that a large navy was essential to protect Germany's colonies and trade, but his real reason for wanting a great fleet was to establish Germany as a world power. A great German fleet, he believed, in conjunction with the navies of other powers would quickly compel Britain to make those colonial concessions which Germany had so long sought in vain through diplomatic means. The British, after all, had established their world empire largely on the basis of seapower, and what the British did, the Germans could do also.

Again the Germans forgot to consider the national interests of other great powers—and of their own. The fleet was for Britain what the army was for Germany: the main line of national defense. Any threat to British naval superiority was therefore a threat to British national security and absolutely decisive in determining British foreign policy. The Germans counted on French and Russian rivalry with Britain in the colonial field to secure the support of these powers against Britain. They neglected to consider that Britain, faced with a threat to her national security, might be willing to make massive concessions in the colonial field to prevent the formation of a naval coalition directed against her, or that France, which still remembered Alsace-Lorraine, might be far more willing to ally herself with Britain than with Germany. It was the fleet issue more than anything else that persuaded British leaders to make the 1904 entente with France.

Thus the Emperor's great fleet, while draining large sums away from the army, the vital factor in Germany's national defense, at the same time added to the number of great powers

Germany's Morocco policy of 1905-6 was primarily an attempt to disrupt the Anglo-French alignment, not a search for a pretext to crush France while Russian armies were tied down in east Asia in the war against Japan. If Germany had really been making a calculated bid for world power or even for continental hegemony, this would have been the moment to strike, but the German Government had no broad aims of any kind. Its foreign policy was hand-to-mouth, shortsighted, and, for a country in Germany's difficult geographical position, disastrous. The Morocco policy itself was based on a set of false premises and never had a chance of accomplishing its object, though it might have won Germany some substantial territorial gains in Africa. A divided leadership, however, cost Germany even this chance of success. For while the German Foreign Office was applying the heaviest kind of diplomatic pressure against France in Morocco, the German Emperor was making another bid to regain the alliance with Russia, and Russia would only agree to a renewal of the German alliance with the consent of France. William, delighted by the prospect of scoring a personal diplomatic triumph, now set out to win over the French by assuring them that he had no interest in Morocco whatever. Thus the German Foreign Office was undercut and the Morocco policy failed, but so too did the Emperor's Russian policy, for France had no intention of allowing her most important continental ally to reenter the German camp.

Meanwhile, German diplomatic pressure on France had done much to convince the British of the reality of the German menace. Far from disrupting the Anglo-French entente, German policy contributed to its consolidation and conversion into an actual military alliance. It also spurred French efforts to bring about an entente between Britain and Russia, which was concluded in 1907. Thus the lines were

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drawn for the events of 1914.

As the ring of alliances formed and tightened around Germany, her leaders became increasingly aware of their hazardous international position. The theory has been advanced that German statesmen, obsessed by the fear of encirclement, decided that their position was desperate, could only grow worse in the future, and that Germany's only chance to survive as a great power was to break the ring by going to war.

There is a second theory, which has recently been bolstered by the voluminous publications of the German historian Fritz Fischer that Germany's leaders, far from fearing the power of the Triple Entente, were convinced of its impotence. They believed that neither France nor Russia was prepared for war, and that Britain, even if she did fight with her allies, was a negligible factor militarily. So certain were they of Germany's military superiority that they chose the opportunity offered by the Sarajevo incident to launch a European war in a bid to establish German supremacy in Europe and the world.

There are two major objections to Professor Fischer's thesis. The first of these is the quality of German leadership, and the second is the actual course of the 1914 crisis. The deliberate provocation of a major war requires a rare degree of foresight, daring, and nerve, but it was the very absence of these qualities that had characterized German policy since 1890. There is no evidence that the situation had suddenly changed in 1914. The only organization with anything like a long-range program was the army with its preposterous Schlieffen plan, but this was to come into effect only if a war broke out. It was in no sense a war plot.

Professor Fischer has fixed on Bethmann-Hollweg as his chief villain, and the German Chancellor certainly played a sorry role in the 1914 crisis. Yet Bethmann was a man of decency and integrity, and in calmer moments he had

a solid sense of political responsibility. What was more, he had the courage to back up his convictions. In the autumn of 1913, for example, the German Crown Prince, a man even more foolish than his father, submitted to the Chancellor the bitter criticisms of a group of German chauvinists about the flabby conduct of German foreign policy, criticisms with which the Crown Prince obviously agreed. Bethmann replied on 15 November 1913:

Our foreign policy is accused of striving to preserve peace at any price, of compromising the honor and dignity of the German Reich. . . . In no instance so far has the honor and dignity of the German nation been violated by another nation. Whoever wants war without such provocation must have vital national tasks in view which cannot be achieved without war. It was to accomplish such tasks and reach such goals that Bismarck desired and launched the wars of 1864, 1866 and 1870. After they were fought and won, he believed that "the most important political interest was the preservation of peace." This was stated by him so often and so clearly, this was so obviously the guiding principle of his entire policy after 1870, that one can only accuse today's warmongers of a consummate lack of political judgment or bad faith when they constantly appeal to the example of Bismarck and actually gain credence for such falsification of history. Every policy for the sake of prestige was condemned by Bismarck as basically un-German. Whither such policy leads he could, and we can, see from the example of Napoleon III.

In a future war undertaken without compelling reason, not only the Hohenzollern crown but

the future of Germany will be at stake. Our policy must of course be conducted boldly. But to rattle our sabers in every diplomatic complication when the honor, security and future of Germany are not threatened is not only foolhardy but criminal.⁴

These are not the words of a man who is thinking in terms of launching precisely the kind of war his critics seemed to desire.

As for the actual course of the crisis, the Germans may indeed have decided that it was a case of now or never to break the ring. There is considerable evidence that German leaders were afraid that in a few years Russian power would be so great that Germany could no longer hope to stand against her, especially if Russia were supported by France. The German historian Egmont Zechlin has concluded: "The desire to remain a first-class power in relation to modern world powers and to maintain its political freedom of action was the main motive of German policy in the July 1914 crisis."⁵

This, it would seem, is a more tenable thesis than that of Professor Fischer, but it too presupposes long-range political thinking on the part of the German Government that was strikingly absent in earlier crises.

There has never been much doubt that the German Government was encouraging Austria to go to war in 1914. Any remaining doubt has now been removed by the research of Professor Fischer and the evidence contained in the recently discovered diaries of Tisza, the Hungarian Prime Minister, and the private correspondence of Tschirschky, the German Ambassador to Vienna. The central issue, however, is not whether the Germans were inciting the Austrians to war, but what kind of war the Germans were trying to unleash. Were they, as Professor Fischer contends, coldbloodedly and deliberately intending to provoke a European war?

Evidence that the German Army had prepared for such a war and that German leaders speculated about future territorial gains is important, but it does not necessarily prove the correctness of the war plot theory.

More plausibly, the documents suggest that the Germans sought a simpler solution to the entire problem and one far more in line with previous German diplomatic maneuvers, namely, that the Germans wanted Austria to exploit the horror evoked by the assassination of the heir to the Austrian crown at Sarajevo to eliminate the menace of Serbia, which was no longer merely a thorn in the side of the Habsburg Empire but seemed a threat to its very existence. A military campaign against Serbia had long been advocated by Conrad von Hötzendorff, the chief of the Austrian general staff, but the Germans lacked confidence in the power of decision and determination of the rest of the Austrian Government. They feared that the opportunity offered by the shocking crime in Bosnia would be frittered away through Austrian *Schlamperei*. These fears were perfectly justified because, despite German pressure and assurances of support, the Austrians allowed a full month to pass between the assassination of their archduke and their declaration of war against Serbia. By that time Europe had had time to recover from its shock, and public opinion, far from being sympathetic to Austria, had turned sharply against her.

The German Government itself had not been exactly quick to exploit the Sarajevo affair, but 6 days after the assassination William II set the tone for the policy of the German Government: "It is essential to clean house in Serbia," he said, "and that very soon."⁶ The German Government was well aware of the danger of foreign intervention, but like the American Government in its policies toward Korea, Cuba, and Vietnam, it took the calculated risk that other powers would not intervene in

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what was after all essentially an Austrian concern. "As things stood today," William assured the Austrians, "Russia is not yet in any way prepared for war, and will certainly think things over very carefully before taking up arms."⁷

The Austrians were less confident that an attack on Serbia would remain isolated, and to calm their fears the Germans assured them repeatedly that in the event of foreign intervention Germany would hold the ring on Austria's behalf. To make certain that the Austrians should have an excuse to deal firmly with Serbia, the Germans demanded an ultimatum so severe that the Serbian Government would be certain to reject it. The Serbs, however, seeing their danger, accepted the most important points of the ultimatum and gave the Austrians the power to "clean house" in Serbia without firing a shot. It is therefore no wonder that the German Emperor, impetuous as always, now declared that all reason for war had disappeared. He required only—and it was an immense only—that the Serbs allow Austria to occupy a part of their territory as a guarantee that they would fulfill the terms of the ultimatum. The German Chancellor, Bethmann-Hollweg recognized the enormity of the Emperor's qualification, and he was evidently doubtful as to whether the Serbs would accept Austrian military occupation peacefully. Still questioning Austria's ability to make a decision, he relayed the orders of the Emperor to the German Ambassador in Vienna with the admonition that these should not be interpreted as an effort to restrain Austria. It was solely a question of finding a way to allow Austria to achieve her desired goal "without at the same time unleashing a world war, but if this proved to be unavoidable in the end, to improve the conditions under which it was to be conducted to the greatest possible advantage to ourselves."⁸

about restraining Austria. By the time the German Emperor's message, as diluted by himself, had reached the Austrian Foreign Ministry, Austria had already declared war on Serbia. The Germans then found to their consternation that the Austrian Army would not be ready for an actual invasion of Serbia for another fortnight. This was *Schlamperei* surpassing even their worst fears. Bethmann saw at once that the Austrian delay would furnish ample time for the other powers to intervene diplomatically and summon a conference to deal with the Serbian problem. At such a conference, as the Germans well knew from the experience at Algenciras in 1906, Austria and Germany, in a minority among the great powers, would be defeated. But if a conference were not accepted and a European war resulted, the odium for starting such a war would fall on Germany. The Emperor made a desperate last-minute effort to draw back from this miserable position until finally the exigencies of the Schlieffen plan propelled Germany into a war not only with Serbia and Russia, but with France and Britain as well. Bethmann, moreover, was fully aware of how bad these circumstances were. If the German Government had indeed planned to make the opening gambit in its bid for world power from an international position of this kind, then its long-range political calculations were even more foolish and irresponsible than its political maneuvers.

The basic flaw in the operations of the German Government in 1914, as so often had been the case during the past quarter century, was that it ignored Bismarck's principle of taking into account the national interests and points of view of other powers. Again and again they repeated their confident belief that if Austria acted quickly, Russia and France would not intervene, that Russia was not ready for war, that the crisis would remain localized as it had always done in the past.

For France and Russia in 1914, however, their own international position could hardly have been more favorable. They were allied with each other and with Britain; they had successfully detached Italy from the Triple Alliance; and the Habsburg Empire seemed to be on the point of disintegration. But how long would these favorable circumstances continue? There were disquieting signs of a *détente* between Britain and Germany, the weak-willed Tsar might succumb to German influences or be assassinated himself. Historians may yet have much to learn about what that shrewd Lorrainer and bitter foe of Germany, Raymond Poincaré, told the Russians in July 1914 or what was said in Cabinet meetings in Paris and St. Petersburg during those fateful days.

So far as the German Government is concerned, it is possible to argue, as does Professor Zechlin, that vital German national interests were at stake in 1914—though this proposition in itself is very doubtful indeed. But vital national interests had not been at stake in Samoa, Kiaochow, the Transvaal, Morocco, Bagdad, Bosnia, the great battle fleet, the Krüger telegram, or in claims to a protectorate over the

Mohammedan world. If German national interests were really at stake in 1914, it was because they had so frequently been transgressed in the past, and because of these same transgressions, Germany now found herself at war under the worst possible military, diplomatic, and moral circumstances.

BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY



Professor Norman Rich did his undergraduate work at Oberlin College and earned both his master's degree and doctorate from the University of California, Berkeley. For 5 years he served on the State

Department's board of editors of the captured German Foreign Office documents. He has been a research fellow at Princeton University and at St. Antony's College, Oxford, and the holder of a Guggenheim Fellowship. Professor Rich has taught at Bryn Mawr College and at Michigan State University. He is currently Professor of History at Brown University. His publications include *Friedrich von Holstein: Politics and Diplomacy in the Age of Bismarck and Wilhelm II; The Age of Nationalism and Reform; Hitler's War Aims*, vol 1: *Ideology, the Nazi State, and the Course of Expansion*; vol 2: *The Establishment of the New Order*.

FOOTNOTES

1. Raymond J. Sontag, *Germany and England: Background of Conflict, 1848-1894* (New York: Norton, 1969), p. 132.
2. William N. Medlicott, *Bismarck and Modern Germany* (Mystic, Conn.: 1965), p. 141.
3. William L. Langer, *European Alliances and Alignments, 1871-1890* (New York: Knopf, 1950), especially p. 451-53 and 504-5.
4. Hartmut Pogge-von Strandmann and Imanuel Geiss, *Die Erforderlichkeit des Unmöglichen. Duetschland om Vorabend des ersten Weltkrieges* (Frankfurt am Main, 1965), p. 32-36.
5. "Die Illusion vom begrenzten Krieg," *Die Zeit* 21 September 1965, p. 5.
6. "Mit den Serben muss aufgeräumt werden, und zwar bald." Marginal note by the Emperor on a report of 30 June 1914, from Tschirschky, his Ambassador to Vienna, to Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg. *Die deutschen Dokumente zum Kriegsausbruch, 1914*, 2 v. (Berlín, 1922), v. 1, no. 7.
7. Szógyény, the Austrian Ambassador to Berlín, to Berchthold, the Austrian Prime Minister, 5 July 1914. *Österreich-Ungarns Aussenpolitik*, 9 v. (Vienna, 1930), v. 8, no. 10058.
8. Bethmann Hollweg to Tschirschky, 28 July 1914. *Die deutschen Dokumente*, v. 1, no. 323.