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Frank McDonough

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The origins of the First World War, 1871–1914

The outbreak of the First World War in 1914 grew out of a short-term crisis in the Balkans, but any attempt to understand its origins must take account of a number of long-standing developments. For much of the nineteenth century, the major European powers maintained a balance of power. However, between 1871 and 1914 a number of factors served to undermine international stability. First, European powers saw international relations as a battle for survival and as a source of status, and engaged in a fresh outburst of imperialism in Africa and Asia. Second, the rise of Germany in central Europe aroused fear and encouraged the growth of alliances. Third, the expansion of national groups demanding self-determination threatened old empires. The final ingredient which brought war were the fatal decisions of the political leaders during the July Crisis of 1914 in the Balkans. The First World War was really the culmination of a long-drawn-out crisis within the European system.¹

The rise of Germany

The rise of Germany was a primary factor which produced tension among the major European powers. The victory of Prussia over France in 1871 concluded the unification of Germany and created a new power at the heart of Europe. As German unification came about – through a combination of crafty diplomacy, industrial strength and military might – this produced anxiety. Contemporaries called it the ‘German Question’. It revolved around how Germany would behave as the most powerful military and economic power in a reshaped Europe. Fear of Germany served to encourage unease and affected the foreign-policy decisions of Germany’s major European rivals.

The startling growth of German power lay at the heart of these concerns. The German population soared from 49 to 66 million between 1890 and 1914, and the economy grew faster than that of any other country in Europe. In 1914, Germany’s steel output was higher than that of Britain, France and Russia combined and coal production had risen to second position behind Britain. The prominence of science and technology in the school curriculum gave Germany a notable lead in new, ‘high-tech’ industries. Germany’s industrial strength was used to increase its military strength. The German army, organised on the basis of conscription, was tactically sophisticated, highly trained and well equipped. German naval expansion ensured that Germany’s fleet rose from being the sixth largest to the second largest in the world.²

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The foreign policy of the new Germany, dominated by Otto von Bismarck, the first chancellor of Germany from 1871 to 1890, was designed to reassure Europe that Germany was a 'satisfied' power, with no intention of disrupting the delicate European balance of power. This ingenious style of diplomacy secured a dominant position for Germany in European affairs through the formation of a delicate system of treaties and alliances, which often contained secret clauses.³ In 1872, the League of the Three Emperors (or *Dreikaiserbund*), consisting of Germany, Russia and Austria-Hungary, was formed. This was followed by the Dual Alliance in 1879 between Germany and Austria-Hungary, which promised mutual assistance in the event of war with Russia. Bismarck believed that the agreement would help restrain the aims of Austria-Hungary in the Balkans, but it had the opposite effect, and encouraged Austria-Hungary to take a bolder stand against Balkan nationalism. The diplomatic position of Germany was further strengthened in Bismarck's time by the formation of a military alliance with Italy in 1882, dubbed the Triple Alliance (of Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy).

It is now apparent that Bismarck was never firmly committed to his Triple Alliance partners. In 1887, for example, he signed the secret Re-insurance Treaty with Russia, without the knowledge of Austria-Hungary or Italy, which pledged Russian neutrality in the event of a German attack on France, German neutrality in the event of a Russian attack on Austria-Hungary (a strange clause, given the terms of the Dual Alliance), and a promise that Germany would support Russia's interests in the Balkans. This diplomatic double-dealing was designed to give Germany maximum flexibility and a number of diplomatic options in the event of any international crisis, but it raised suspicions in Austria-Hungary, Russia and Italy. But it seems that Bismarck's duplicity was designed to ensure a peaceful outcome to any future inter-national problems.⁴

The Bulgarian Crisis and the Balkan problem

Bismarck's desire to be the public ally of Austria-Hungary and the secret ally of Russia foundered during the course of the Bulgarian Crisis of the late nineteenth century. Bulgaria, a group of small, semi-independent states, was one of the most explosive and poorly governed parts of the Ottoman Empire. The key cause of instability was the existence of a wide range of nationalist groups agitating for religious toleration and self-government. In 1876, a full-scale Bulgarian rebellion was under way, with the various nationalist groups receiving support from Serbia, Montenegro and Russia. This crisis eventually escalated into a full-scale war between Russia and Turkey from 1877 to 1878 over the future of Bulgaria, culminating in defeat for the Ottoman Empire, which was forced to sign the Treaty of San Stefano (1878). Under this agreement, Bulgaria was given virtual independence, Serbia and Romania received territory and Russia and Austria-Hungary agreed to supervise reforms in Bosnia-Herzegovina. However, the British and Austro-Hungarian governments believed that the agreement had given Russia too much power in the Balkans. In the end, Bismarck decided to play 'honest broker' in the crisis, and proposed an international congress in Berlin. Under the Treaty of Berlin (1878), it was agreed that Russia would retain

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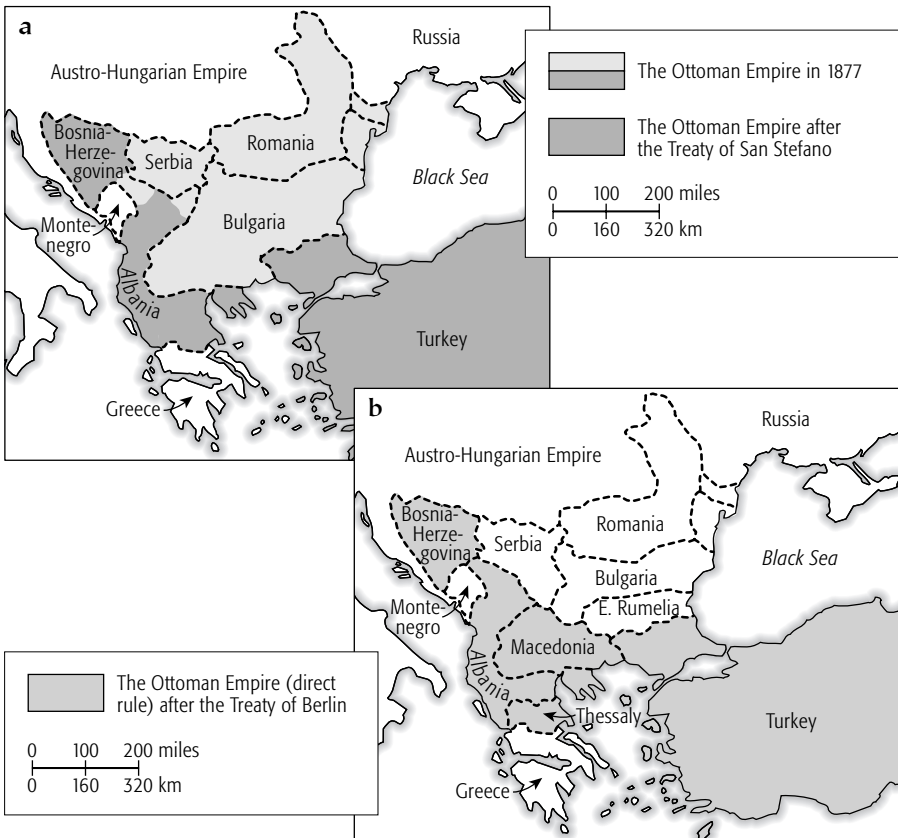
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its territorial gains, Serbia, Montenegro and Romania would keep their independence, and Bosnia-Herzegovina would be placed under the exclusive administration of Austria-Hungary.

The settlement of Bulgaria's territory proved more sensitive, and less satisfactory. Bulgaria was turned into an autonomous principality of the Ottoman Empire, with a Christian government and a national army. However, major changes were proposed to its existing boundaries, with the aim of preserving Ottoman power: south and south-west Bulgaria (dubbed 'Big Bulgaria') and Eastern Rumelia were allowed to remain under Ottoman rule. This served to encourage more civil unrest. In 1885, nationalists in Eastern Rumelia revolted against Ottoman rule and demanded the right to join the rest of Bulgaria. The Russian government used the revolt as a pretext to gain further territory. However, Austria-Hungary wanted Bulgaria to remain completely



Map 1. The consequences for the Ottoman Empire and for Bulgaria of the Bulgarian Crisis, 1878: (a) after the Treaty of San Stefano and (b) after the Treaty of Berlin.

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independent of tsarist influence and enlisted the support of Bismarck, who sided with the Habsburg monarchy (which presided over the Austro-Hungarian Empire), much to the annoyance of the Tsar, who was forced to withdraw Russian troops from Bulgaria, which remained independent.

The Bulgarian Crisis revealed the complexity of the Balkan problem, which revolved around nationalist demands for self-determination, the gradual decline of Ottoman rule and the designs of Russia and Austria-Hungary. It showed how easily problems in the Balkans could create a delicate international situation. More importantly, the crisis revealed that in any Habsburg–tsarist dispute, Germany was not prepared to see Russia profit. The significance of the Bulgarian Crisis was threefold: it put an end to the League of the Three Emperors; it severely weakened Germany's role as a so-called 'honest broker' in the Balkans; and it killed the Re-Insurance Treaty, which the Russians saw as a worthless and unscrupulous agreement that was not renewed.

Thus, even the shrewd diplomacy of Bismarck foundered on the rocks of the Balkans. The attempt to balance the irreconcilable differences between Austria-Hungary and Russia was really an exercise in crisis management rather than a real solution to the conflict between the two powers in the region. Even so, Bismarck's fall from power in 1890 is still viewed as a key turning point on the road to war. After all, the German leaders who followed him favoured confrontation over conciliation. Obviously, Bismarck's cautious policy was successful in the short term, but there is no guarantee that he would have continued to adopt such a conciliatory line had he remained in office. He was already coming under increasing pressure to adopt a popular aggressive and expansionist foreign policy before his abrupt dismissal by the young Kaiser Wilhelm II. Paradoxically, the fact that Bismarck's alliance diplomacy had placed Germany in such a strong diplomatic position actually encouraged other, less shrewd German figures in the aristocracy, army and navy to push for a bolder and more expansionist foreign policy.⁵

The impact of imperialism

It was not only the swift rise of Germany which created a climate of tension in European affairs. Another development was to have an equally profound impact: the sudden and unexpected upsurge of imperialism from 1880 to 1914 in Africa and Asia. The governments of Britain, France, Germany and Italy, and King Leopold II of the Belgians, all became entangled in a rapid partition of Africa, which resulted in 90 per cent of all African territory being brought under European rule. Russia, Britain, France, Japan, Germany and the USA all took part in a similarly feverish scramble for territorial gains in Asia. The major European powers saw this 'new imperialism' as a battle for wealth, growth, power and survival.⁶ Lord Salisbury, the British prime minister, said that the world was being divided into 'living and dying' powers.⁷ To remain a great power, or to become one, seemed to require the possession of an empire.

The causes of this amazing search for territory are extremely complex. Local

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traders, agents, bankers and investors encouraged imperial expansion and expected European governments to defend their interests. This produced a number of diverse responses. Bondholders pressed the British government to occupy Egypt in 1882; Karl Peters, a German explorer, called on Bismarck to help consolidate the gains of his German East Africa Company; George Goldie asked the British government for help to consolidate his palm-oil monopoly on the Niger river; owners of gold mines and diamond mines pressed the British government to defend their interests in South Africa; and major industrial companies attempted to gain a monopoly over supplies of raw materials in Africa and Asia. In many cases, a number of local difficulties often dragged reluctant governments in to defend national interests. Local nationalist movements also played their part: some sought to defend territory in Africa and Asia, others wanted to collaborate with specific European powers in order to retain some semblance of local influence.

The motive of each of the European powers is likewise complex. The British government wished to maintain its dominance in the colonial sphere; as other European powers sought to expand, the British responded by seizing colonies. The French saw its empire partly in terms of economic gain and partly in terms of helping to restore its damaged national pride after its defeat by Germany in the Franco-Prussian War. King Leopold II of Belgium sought an empire to enhance his own status and for purely economic reward. The Italians coveted territory to emphasise their claims to be treated as a major European power. The German government often used imperialism to increase its popularity at home.

A principal aim of all the European powers was to gain territory by attacking small, weak powers and pre-industrial peoples, and to ensure that such conflicts remained localised. Where any discord over territory arose, European powers often co-operated in diplomatic agreements to make sure that such crises did not escalate. The partition of West Africa, for example, was decided peacefully by a number of European powers at the West Africa Conference in Berlin (1884–85). Britain and Germany settled their problems in East Africa by peaceful negotiation. The European scramble for trading rights in China was also resolved by diplomatic agreement. On the other hand, imperial problems served to intensify the rivalry between many European powers: Anglo-French differences in North Africa almost ended in war at Fashoda in 1898, while Anglo-Russian relations often reached the point of war over issues of mutual interest in Persia, Afghanistan and China. The relations of Japan and Russia deteriorated over their imperial differences in Asia, and actually did result in war between 1904 and 1905, which resulted in a surprise Japanese victory.

The most unfortunate consequences of the 'new imperialism' were the creation of an atmosphere of heightened patriotism (known as jingoism), the glorification of armed force, and the denial of national self-determination to small powers. Major European powers became obsessed with gaining further territory and showing no sign of weakness. The principle of the large powers grabbing territory from the small powers, a key aspect of the 'new imperialism', caused tension. It is probably correct to suggest that the First World War was not

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directly caused by the ‘new imperialism’, but that its influence on future events was not insignificant. The craving of the great powers to expand at the expense of weaker states, and the hunger of the weaker states, especially in eastern Europe, for self-determination, created an atmosphere in which mutual antagonism became the order of the day. British fears of imperial decline, German ambitions for an empire, and Austro-Hungarian anxiety regarding a loss of its power, were all linked to the general ‘survival-of-the-fittest’ mood which the imperialist age had profoundly influenced. The imperialist idea of struggle and rivalry emphasised the need for bold new policies and dynamic solutions to problems in international relations.

Kaiser Wilhelm, German world policy and German aims

The desire for a bold new approach to foreign policy was most noticeable in Germany. In 1897, Kaiser Wilhelm II announced that Germany would adopt a ‘world policy’ (*Weltpolitik*). The logic behind *Weltpolitik* seemed reasonable enough: the Kaiser claimed that German industrial expansion was so dependent on imports of raw materials from overseas that a vast colonial empire was required, with a large navy to support it. Thus, *Weltpolitik* was committed to a large programme of naval expansion and heavy involvement in colonial affairs. However, this abrupt change in German policy, from the prudence of Bismarck to the confrontational style of Kaiser Wilhelm, marks a crucial turning point in Germany’s foreign policy in the years which led to war.⁸ The reasons why Kaiser Wilhelm opted for *Weltpolitik* have been the subject of enormous debate. The timing of the policy is usually put down to the appointment by the Kaiser of von Bülow as chancellor, and Admiral von Tirpitz as naval minister, who both favoured an expansionist foreign policy with three key aims.

- 1 To build a German navy which would match the best in the world. It was hoped that a strong German navy would encourage Britain to opt for neutrality in any future European war.
- 2 To make Germany a major imperial power. This implied territorial expansion overseas.
- 3 To use foreign-policy issues to increase support for authoritarian rule. This would weaken the appeal of socialism and democracy.

The real problem was that the Kaiser, the chancellor and leading foreign, military and naval advisers appeared to pursue perhaps one, but never all of these aims at any one time. The result was a lack of co-ordination in foreign policy, and a great deal of confusion over whether *Weltpolitik* was a genuine attempt to find Germany ‘a place in the sun’ or whether it was merely a useful political tactic to weaken the domestic appeal of social democracy at home.

The rhetoric used by German leaders in pursuit of *Weltpolitik* was often daring and confrontational. The German government engaged in a clear orchestration of patriotism. The German press, heavily influenced by the Kaiser’s press office,

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A *Punch* cartoon of 1890 shows the new Kaiser with representatives of Russia, Britain, France and Austria-Hungary. What point is the cartoonist trying to make?

whipped up jingoism and fomented antagonism against other nations. Nationalist pressure groups, including the Navy League, the Colonial Society and the Pan-German League, supported *Weltpolitik*. German history books venerated great German conquests of the past. The Kaiser often saw *Weltpolitik* as a means of warding off the rise of socialism in Germany by diverting attention towards external issues. Admiral von Tirpitz, the prime mover in building the German navy, was fully aware that a naval race could act as a rallying point for German public opinion in support of the existing authoritarian government. The success or failure of *Weltpolitik* therefore became a central issue in German domestic politics.⁹

The policy created a great deal of tension, accomplished very little, and soured international relations. In the view of Bethmann Hollweg, the German chancellor who replaced von Bülow, *Weltpolitik* had ‘challenged everybody, got in everybody’s way but actually weakened nobody’. The Kaiser never contemplated the conflict that a bold, expansionist Germany foreign policy would provoke abroad. The major world powers had no intention of smoothing the path for Germany to become a dominant world power and Germany met hostility in every direction. The British engaged in a naval race and maintained supremacy. The USA thwarted German ambitions in Venezuela and the Philippines, the British and French obstructed German ambitions in Morocco, and the British and

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French denied Germany capital to build the Berlin–Baghdad Railway. All the major European powers ganged up together to ensure that Germany made no significant economic gains in China in 1900. The only territorial gains that Germany made in its search for *Weltpolitik* were small gains in the Congo, a 99-year lease on

Kiao-chow in China, two small Samoan islands, some small Pacific islands and a fleet of costly dreadnought battleships, which were not used in battle during the First World War, except at the Battle of Jutland. *Weltpolitik* is a classic case of ambition outweighing common sense. The German government wasted a great deal of effort in pursuing a policy which was both costly and led other European powers to regard Germany as a real danger to European peace.

The drift towards alliances

The most unfortunate consequence of *Weltpolitik* was the impact which it had on European diplomatic alignments. In 1871, there was no system of fixed military alliances among the major European powers. The creation of peacetime alliances began with Bismarck's Dual Alliance (1879) and Triple Alliance (1882). Both agreements were seen as defensive, and produced no rival set of alliances. Yet German support for Austria-Hungary during the Bulgarian Crisis led to much friendlier Franco-Russian relations, which eventually resulted in the formation of a firm military alliance in 1894. Under the terms of the Franco-Russian Alliance, each power pledged military co-operation in the event of war against any member of the Triple Alliance. This created a second alliance grouping in Europe, with the clear aim of checking German ambitions. In direct consequence of this agreement, French investment poured into Russia to support the development of its industry and economy, and close diplomatic and military links grew.

These alliances also encouraged the development of detailed military plans. The German army had to plan for a war on two fronts. In 1905, for example, General von Schlieffen developed a detailed war plan that involved a quick and decisive attack on France, followed by an all-out assault on Russia. The Russian army chiefs also made detailed plans for a rapid assault on Austria-Hungary and East Prussia in the event of war. French military chiefs planned a lightning offensive against Germany on the latter's western front. Thus the idea of fighting a future war within a coalition was becoming firmly planted in Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy, as well as in France and Russia.¹⁰

The only major European power outside these two alliance groups was Britain, which remained in 'splendid', but increasingly precarious, isolation. However, the hectic imperial rivalry of the late nineteenth century had extended British military and naval resources to breaking point. The emergence of Germany as a major colonial and naval rival caused deep concern. Russia was also a menace to British India. The growth of Japan in the Far East, and continuing Anglo-French rivalry in Africa and Indo-China, further fuelled the idea that Britain's military resources were becoming seriously over-stretched.

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Many prominent British statesmen started to call for an end to Britain's diplomatic isolation. In 1898, negotiations were started, intending to build an Anglo-German 'understanding', but animosity between Britain and Germany intensified during the era of *Weltpolitik*, largely over naval rivalry, and the idea was dropped.

The first move by the British government away from isolation was the signing of the Anglo-Japanese Treaty (1902), which was designed to ease Britain's worry over trade in the region and to ease fears over the Russian threat to India. However, the Anglo-Japanese Alliance encouraged Japan to go to war with Russia between 1904 and 1905, when it gained an unexpected victory. A more significant agreement was the Entente Cordiale, signed in 1904 between Britain and France. This cleared up Anglo-French colonial differences in Africa and Asia: the French agreed to British primacy in Egypt in return for a 'free hand' in Morocco. The Anglo-French entente was a colonial agreement, and gave no promise of military co-operation in the event of a European war.¹¹

The Entente Cordiale was not viewed in this way by the Kaiser, however, who suspected that it was a secret military alliance aimed at 'encircling Germany'. He wanted to test the closeness of the agreement. In January 1905, a French diplomatic mission arrived in Fez to seek special privileges for French traders in Morocco. In March 1905, in a tense and provocative move, Kaiser Wilhelm steamed into the Moroccan port of Tangier aboard a German naval vessel, requested equal treatment for German trade, and offered German support to maintain Moroccan independence. In May 1905, Lord Lansdowne, the British foreign secretary, sent a message to the French government, which gave some vague hope that the entente might, under certain circumstances, be converted into a military alliance. Delcassé, the French foreign minister, interpreted this as an offer by Britain to enter into an Anglo-French alliance, which it clearly was not. The Kaiser insisted that the French government should dismiss Delcassé for seeking to sour Franco-German relations. In response, the French government, unprepared to face Germany in war, and with no promise of British support, sacked Delcassé and agreed to settle Franco-German differences over Morocco at an international conference. This decisive show of strength by the Kaiser had seemingly shown that the Entente Cordiale was little more than a worthless piece of paper.

The Algeciras Conference duly took place between January and April 1906. However, Sir Edward Grey, the new Liberal foreign secretary, expressed private concerns over the high-handed behaviour of the Kaiser during the Delcassé affair, and offered enthusiastic British support for French claims in Morocco. The Russian government, under prompting from France, offered similar encouragement. As a result, the French gained a significant diplomatic victory over Germany at Algeciras. Morocco's independence was confirmed, but France and Spain gained authority over the police, and France was given control over the Moroccan central bank.¹² All that the Kaiser's bullying had achieved was to heighten fears in France, Britain and Russia about German imperial ambitions. This simply encouraged the development of closer Franco-Russian relations and

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set British foreign policy in a clear, anti-German direction. In the wake of the crisis, Grey ordered Anglo-French military conversations and sought to improve Anglo-Russian relations. In 1907, Britain signed the Anglo-Russian Convention, which settled Anglo-Russian imperial differences in Afghanistan, Tibet and Persia (modern-day Iran).¹³ The German government saw the agreement as a bitter blow which cemented its growing diplomatic encirclement. The term 'Triple Entente' (of France, Russia and Britain) started to be used to describe the new diplomatic friendship between these three major European powers.

The Anglo-German naval race, which reached its most excitable stage between 1908 and 1910, added to international tension. The German desire for a navy on a world scale met a British desire to maintain its naval supremacy. The speed at which new, state-of-the-art dreadnought-class battleships could be built in Britain and Germany produced panic and antagonism. The Anglo-German naval race soured British attitudes towards Germany more than any other factor. Sir Edward Grey claimed that it was the major reason why Britain went to war in 1914.¹⁴ From 1907 to 1914, British naval expenditure increased from £31.5 to £50 million per annum in order to meet the German challenge and to maintain supremacy. Robert Cecil, a Conservative MP, claimed that as the Germans wanted a large fleet and the British were determined to maintain supremacy, there was 'no hope of finding common ground'.¹⁵ The Anglo-German naval race led the British government to become even more disturbed and frightened about the direction of German policy.

The 1908-09 Bosnian Crisis served to stir up Russian fears about German aims in the Balkans. In October 1908, Austria-Hungary suddenly annexed Bosnia-Herzegovina as a result of its fear of a spread of the 'Young Turk' (a reforming movement active in the Ottoman Empire) revolution. The Tsar expressed outrage at the annexation, but the Kaiser said that if Russia went to war over the issue, Germany would stand by Austria-Hungary. *The Times* claimed that the Kaiser had stood by Austria in 'shining armour'. This dose of German diplomatic bullying made the Russian government all the more resolved to increase its defence expenditure, draw closer to its potential allies, and not back down in the Balkans again.¹⁶

In 1911, a second major crisis over Morocco brought Europe to the very edge of war. In May 1911, the French government sent troops to put down a revolt in Fez. In July, a German gunboat arrived in the Moroccan port of Agadir in a provocative move designed to gain colonial concessions from France. Sir Edward Grey offered the French government full support throughout the Agadir Crisis. In October 1911, the German government decided to seek a negotiated settlement of the crisis, and received territory in the Congo in return for recognising French control in Morocco.¹⁷ The Agadir Crisis brought a danger of war, and drew Britain and France closer together in the face of the German threat. *Weltpolitik* was revealed as a dangerous and provocative policy. After Agadir, the British made a firm plan to send a British Expeditionary Force (BEF) of 150,000 troops to France in the event of war, and signed naval agreements with both France and Russia.

During these years, the military and diplomatic balance of power in Europe