

larly Russia, which had extended its empire across Asia by precisely this method. The annexation of contiguous land was not only easier to contemplate but also spilled over into questions of national security. For Japan, Russia was not just a colonial competitor but a long-term threat to its safety. For Britain, France, and Germany, by contrast, China was very remote—even more so than Africa.

The same dangers of proximity can be seen in the struggle over the other great crumbling imperium that had long been ripe for dismemberment: the Ottoman Empire. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the empire was already much reduced from its heyday. In Africa it had lost Algeria, Tunis, and Egypt; in Europe it had lost Serbia, Greece, Bulgaria, Montenegro, and its Romanian provinces. The Ottomans retained, however, a huge swath of territory from Turkey through the Middle East. This area was to be the scene of a struggle among the European powers that at times looked as if it might well endanger the peace. The project of a railway linking the Bosphorus to the Persian Gulf was perhaps the most important and certainly most contentious of all the major railway projects of the late prewar period. Germany, which obtained the concession in 1899, aimed to become the major power in the area and to gain access to its vast agricultural and mineral riches (including, people now started to speculate, petroleum). The advantages of the railway went beyond access to resources. It also had a geopolitical dimension. In alliance with Turkey, the railway would provide a method of projecting German military power into Asia where it could threaten the British Empire. In 1903, the German writer Paul Rohrbach made the strategic implications clear:

If it comes to war ... all idea of invading England is purely chimerical ... England can be attacked and mortally wounded by land ... only in one place—Egypt. The loss of Egypt would mean for England not only the end of her dominion over the Suez Canal, and of her connexions with India and the Far East, but would probably entail also the loss of her possessions in Central and East Africa ... Turkey, however, can never dream of recovering Egypt until she is mistress of a developed railway system in Asia Minor and Syria.⁴⁹

Not surprisingly, Britain was deeply hostile to the project and responded by creating a protectorate in Kuwait to block access to the Persian Gulf, and then refused to allow any increase in Ottoman customs duties to finance the Mesopotamian stretches of the railway.* More than one observer saw the parallels with the tensions that led to the Russo-Japanese War:

The trans-Mesopotamian Railway ... will play in the Near East the same ominous part which the Trans-Siberian played in the Far East; with this important difference, however, that whilst the Far Eastern conflict involved only one European Power and one Asiatic Power, the Near Eastern conflict, if it breaks out, must needs involve all the European Powers, must force the whole Eastern Question to a crisis, and, once begun, cannot be terminated until the map of Europe and Asia shall be reconstructed.⁵⁰

Unlike Russia and Japan, Britain and Germany managed to resolve their differences without resorting to arms. They did so by the classic Great Power method of dividing the area into spheres of interest. In a series of agreements between 1911 and 1914, Britain agreed to lift its objections to the railway as long as it went no farther than Baghdad, leaving Britain with an unchallenged dominance in southern Mesopotamia and the Gulf. Germany was left with a preeminent position in Anatolia and northern Mesopotamia, while France and Russia were satisfied with Syria and Armenia respectively.

However, even if the quarrels over the Bagdad Railway could be settled peacefully, this did not mean that compromise would always rule the day closer to home. It was in the Ottoman Empire in Europe that the most intractable conflicts arose, and it was in the Balkans that the "long peace" from 1815 to 1914 finally came to an end, when the assassination of the heir to the Austro-Hungarian empire by a Bosnian Serb nationalist led to a war that sucked in all the Great Powers. How could such a disastrous outcome to an apparently localized crisis have come about?

In many ways, the descent into war was the result of a series of missteps in which the Great Powers sleepwalked to disaster.⁵¹ Apart from Austria-Hungary, which ac-

tually wanted a war, the other powers were gambling in a high-stakes poker game in the expectation that the other side would be forced into a humiliating climb down. The risks were compounded by strict timetables for military mobilization, which gave the decision for war a use-it-or-lose-it quality reminiscent of the Cold War. However, it is also true that the powers would not have been playing poker if they had not had underlying strategic reasons to contemplate resorting to war, and if the Balkan crisis had not seemed an opportune moment to gamble.

The First World War was, like several previous European wars that had involved most of the continent, a series of different conflicts fought concurrently, each with its own causes. It is scarcely surprising that with so many participants it is impossible to disentangle a single cause. Moreover, the Great Powers endeavored to win domestic support for war by presenting their opponents as aggressors and themselves as innocent victims—thus making their words and actions in July 1914 harder to decipher.

For Austria-Hungary, the war was about survival. As a multiethnic empire whose minorities were already chafing at the bit of German and Hungarian domination, it was highly vulnerable. Serbian nationalism threatened more than its Bosnian and Croatian provinces, potentially provoking the complete disintegration of the empire. The lesson of the Spanish-American War was that, in a world now ruthlessly divided into rising and declining empires, being European was no guarantee against being dismembered by more successful rivals. The only solution to Austria-Hungary's existential crisis was to eliminate the Serbian threat once and for all. The assassination in Sarajevo gave it the opportunity to do so.

Russian motives were more complex. As the self-proclaimed protector of Orthodox Christian Slavs throughout Eastern Europe, it could not allow the destruction of its Serbian client without suffering a considerable loss of prestige and influence in the Balkans. But more important were its long-term strategic ambitions in the Black Sea. Russia had never given up on its plans to get control of the Turkish Straits so as to gain unfettered access to the Mediterranean. It had already fought wars to achieve this ambition in the 1850s and the 1870s. As Russia's foreign minister Sergey Sazonov told Tsar Nicholas in January 1914, "The state which possesses the

Straits will hold in its hands not only the key of the Black Sea and Mediterranean, but also that of penetration into Asia Minor and the sure means of hegemony in the Balkans.”⁵² But the straits were not only a key to further imperial expansion; they also were a potential threat to Russia’s survival. Whoever controlled them could block Russia’s use of its only warm-water port in Europe and prevent the export of wheat, the country’s major source of foreign exchange. In the Russo-Japanese War, Russia’s Black Sea fleet had been prevented from taking part in the campaign against Japan because of Turkey’s long-standing prohibition of foreign warships passing through the straits. Now Russia’s hope of gaining control of the straits was threatened by Turkey’s pending acquisition of two dreadnought battleships that were due to be delivered before the end of 1914. These ships would render Russia’s fleet obsolete overnight. Once that occurred, the Russian ambassador in Constantinople warned, “in the event of a crisis,... the Turkish fleet will be able to strike a decisive blow against us. This blow will not only be devastating to our Black Sea fleet, but to our entire position in the Near East.”⁵³ Since Britain had consistently opposed any attempt by Russia to take over the straits (and was supplying the dreadnoughts to Turkey), Russia’s only hope of resolving this conundrum was to attack Turkey as part of a wider war in which Britain was on Russia’s side. The Balkan crisis offered such a possibility.

Germany’s calculations were equally complex. Like Russia, it could not stomach the damage to its prestige of a climb down by a close ally—especially after Germany’s recent humiliation during the second Moroccan Crisis. And also like Russia, Germany faced a narrowing window of opportunity to go to war before the military odds turned against it.

Since the accession of William II in 1890, Germany had succeeded in maneuvering itself into a military cul-de-sac. Bismarck, once he had succeeded in unifying the country, had shown no further desire for military adventures and was concerned only to avoid making enemies. While there could be no friendship with France after the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine, Germany could at least maintain amicable relations with the other Great Powers. It was Bismarck’s diplomacy, as much as anything, that kept the European peace in the 1870s and ’80s. William, however,

was convinced that Germany should no longer be content with its position in the world. Bismarck was dismissed, and the new aggressive tone of German foreign policy alienated many of the country's previous friends. The key alliance with Russia, which had lasted in different forms since 1815, was allowed to lapse in 1890. France was now able to woo Russia into an alliance in 1892—ending the isolation so carefully orchestrated by Bismarck and threatening Germany with invasion on two fronts in the event of another war. The solution to Germany's military dilemma was the Schlieffen Plan, which counted on knocking France out of the war in a few weeks before the ponderous might of the Russian army could be thrown against it. But after 1913, Russia had embarked on a program to increase the size of its army and, more important, to upgrade and expand its railway system. When completed, Russia would be able to reduce the time for mobilization to just over two weeks, and the Schlieffen Plan would be rendered useless. For Germany, the ideal war was one that started in the Balkans and therefore included Austria-Hungary, which would provide vital assistance against Russia in the crucial early weeks of fighting. It was for this reason that Germany was willing to gamble on the possibility of war by giving the Austrians a blank check to take as firm a position as they wished against Serbia in July 1914.

However, the rulers of Germany did not see war purely in terms of preemptive defense. There was a strong feeling that the worldwide scramble for imperial possessions had left Germany without its due rewards. Africa and East Asia were already carved up (although Admiral Victor Valois of the German navy could declare publicly in 1912 that “the division of continental possessions among the European powers will not be accomplished by claims on territory and colonial treaties. These decisions will be made only on the great European battlefields of the future”⁵⁴).

There remained Europe. An increasing number of Germans were convinced that the only way for the country to ensure its rightful place among the top world powers was through the economic and political domination of the continent—whether by peaceful or nonpeaceful means. This was the basis of the “September Program,” which outlined German aims in the first weeks of the war when a rapid victory still seemed possible. Russia should be thrust back out of Eastern Europe, and its role

there replaced by a Central European customs union that would be extended to include France, Belgium, Holland, Denmark, and Italy. In theory the union would have little formal authority, but “in practice [it] will be under German leadership and must stabilize Germany’s economic dominance over Central Europe [Mitteleuropa].”⁵⁵ As part of this plan, France would have to sign a commercial treaty that would make it “economically dependent on Germany [and secure] the French market for our exports.” Holland, related to Germany through ethnic ties, should be brought into a close relationship with the German empire without any compulsion, but in a form that would leave it “independent in externals, but be made internally dependent on us.”⁵⁵ Such phrases make for uncomfortable reading in light of recent events in the eurozone. If Germany had won the war, most of Europe would have become an informal Teutonic empire.

After the war, France liked to portray itself as the hapless victim of German aggression. But its role was less innocent than it appeared. As the Balkan crisis unfolded, the French president Raymond Poincaré visited St. Petersburg, where he encouraged Russia to take a hard line against any Austrian aggression against Serbia. Although it is likely that the leaders of both countries were planning on an Austrian climb down rather than war, the military option was clearly on the table. Russia started to mobilize in secret as soon as Poincaré left. The decisions made in St. Petersburg were as important as those made in Vienna and Berlin in the collapse of peace.

Behind France’s gamble lay its long-term rivalry with Germany. The loss of Alsace and Lorraine in 1871 was not only a deep and continuing affront to national pride; it was also a matter of geostrategic importance. Lorraine contained Europe’s largest deposits of iron ore, without which Germany’s dominance of steelmaking would never have occurred. Before 1870, the iron- and steelmaking capacity of the two countries had been more or less equal; but after Germany’s victory, its steel industry had powered ahead until by 1914 its output was almost four times greater than France’s. Yet German economic ascendancy depended on “French” iron ore. For the next forty years, the mines of Lorraine were to be at the center of the struggle for the fate of Europe. Although France had no immediate thought of going to war with Germany to reclaim its lost provinces in 1914, they were at the top of any list of potential war

aims. The French were well aware that they would have no hope of overcoming their enemy single-handedly. They could hope to succeed only in a general war where Germany would have to fight multiple enemies at once. A war that started in Eastern Europe, and pulled in Russia first, would be to its advantage.

That left Britain. The country had less reason than any other to want war. It had settled its differences with Germany over the Bagdad Railway, and the naval arms race appeared to have cooled down, with Berlin accepting that Kaiserliche Marine would not achieve anything like local parity with the Royal Navy in the foreseeable future. Moreover, Britain's ententes with France and Russia did not oblige it to go to war. Knowing this, Germany attempted to keep Britain out of the war almost as hard as France attempted to pull it in. Yet in the end Britain went to war over a mere "slip of paper"—the treaty that guaranteed Belgium's neutrality—siding with France and Russia in an act that the kaiser condemned as "racial treachery."

However, Britain, like France, Germany, and Russia, had strategic reasons to go to war that went beyond its official justification. For centuries British foreign policy had focused on preventing the rise of a single dominant power in Europe for fear that it would jeopardize British security. There was no reason to abandon this policy now; and in some ways it was even more relevant in 1914 than in earlier centuries because of Britain's growing dependency on sea trade. Whatever Germany said about respecting the territorial integrity of Belgium, it was more than likely that a German victory would give it control of the Belgian seaports, posing a direct threat to British control of the Channel. As the foreign secretary Sir Edward Grey explained the position to the cabinet, there were three fundamental British interests that could not under any circumstances be abandoned: (1) the German fleet should not occupy, under Britain's neutrality, the North Sea and English Channel; (2) Germany should not seize and occupy the northwestern part of France opposite Britain; and (3) Germany should not violate the ultimate independence of Belgium and occupy Antwerp as a standing menace to Britain.⁵⁶

The other British calculation was more circuitous yet no less important. According to Grey, had Britain not declared war, "We should have been isolated; we should have had no friend in the world; no one would have ... thought our friendship worth

having.”⁵⁷ This sounds on the surface like a simple piece of postfactual moralizing. Yet it reflected an important strategic reality. Britain’s ententes with France and Russia were skin-deep. Little more than ten years earlier they, not Germany, had been seen as Britain’s chief imperial rivals. To abandon them would risk reactivating their anti-British imperial strategies, which, in the case of Russia in particular, were seen as extremely dangerous. As Sir George Buchanan, the British ambassador to Russia, wrote to the Foreign Office in April 1914, “Russia is rapidly becoming so powerful that we must retain her friendship at almost any cost. If she acquires the conviction that we are unreliable and useless as a friend, she may one day strike a bargain with Germany and resume her liberty of action on Turkey and Persia.”⁵⁸ Allies, in an unstable multipolar world, were potentially as dangerous as enemies. In the end, Britain was forced to compromise its long-standing policy of keeping Russia away from the Mediterranean in order to keep Germany away from the Channel.

Trade featured prominently in the motives that drove Europe to war in 1914. For Britain and Russia it was control of straits that in hostile hands threatened economic strangulation. For Germany it was the expansion of its commercial empire. But in a grotesque inversion of the hopes of the liberals, trade was no longer the keeper of peace between nations but was at the center of a fight to the death for survival.

What was certain was that the rising bonds of commercial interdependence had not made war “obsolete” or “impossible” as had been claimed. In 1913, Germany’s foreign trade was dominated by three partners: Britain, Russia, and the United States, each of which was more important to it, commercially, than its ally Austria-Hungary. For Britain, Germany was its second-largest trade partner, behind the United States but ahead of India. For Russia, Germany was even more important, constituting a third of its total trade. If the liberals had been right, these countries should never have gone to war—yet they did.