

Europe between Democracy and Dictatorship

1900–1945

Conan Fischer

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To Mary, Kate and Jane



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Foreword

Between 1900 and 1945 two world wars and a string of murderous dictatorships called time on an age of European global preeminence, material and moral. They form the main subject matter of this book, but do not dominate it entirely. Interwar Europe also experienced deep-seated and far-reaching changes that testified to human society's powers of innovation and renewal and laid many foundations of the post-1945 world. Contrasting paradigms therefore compete for our attention: an abysmal story of conflict, economic crisis, dictatorship and slaughter which had by 1945 left much of the continent a smouldering wasteland, but against this the fruits and legacy of constructive diplomacy, cultural vibrancy, political and social emancipation, prosperity and technological advance.

The labyrinthine complexity of the European story prevents easy generalization or the full and equal treatment of all themes, places and events. Each author will bring their own perspectives, enthusiasms and expertise to a general history and this work is no exception, laying a degree of emphasis and sometimes a revisionist take on the international diplomacy of a turbulent and warlike age. The book adopts a broadly chronological approach to the general European story, embedding the two great wars within the narrative, but foregrounds selected major events and themes, such as the post-1918 peace settlements, the key revolutionary upheavals, economic crises, and also cultural change. Brief national histories appear at appropriate points and, as far as space has allowed, the "peripheral" and smaller nations of Europe are not ignored. They were no less caught up in the events of the earlier twentieth century than the great powers, even if they more often ended up as victim or prey rather than predator.

Referencing is denser than in many general histories, but the sheer scale of first-rate scholarship on this period must leave the attribution selective. It serves essentially as an entry into a range of specialist and general works. Quotation has been used widely both to provide a flavour of other authors' writing and to lend life and colour to this fascinating period in Europe's history, sometimes exploiting nonacademic sources, occasionally to be taken with a good dash of salt.

The commissioning editors at Wiley-Blackwell, Gillian Kane and Tessa Harvey, have provided encouragement and wise counsel throughout and proved remarkably tolerant as the book outgrew its planned scope and dimensions. I owe a major debt of gratitude to John Stevenson who provided very helpful and much appreciated comments on the finished typescript and also wish to thank many friends and colleagues who have helped me in a variety of ways. Among them, Hartmut Pogge von Strandmann and Volker Berghahn kindly read and commented on some earlier sections of the draft; others, including Simon Adams and Alan Sharp, lent or gave me more esoteric items from their personal libraries. My former Department at the University of Strathclyde generously granted me leave to complete the book, invaluable time for which I am particularly grateful. Finally, once again, I must thank my wife, Mary, and my daughters, Kate and Jane, for their unstinting patience, advice and support during the completion of this book, which has imposed on their lives too much and for too long.

C.J.F., Edinburgh



Chapter One

The European Paradox

At the turn of the twentieth century Europe enjoyed unprecedented prosperity and a vibrant cultural life. The continent was also witnessing a series of scientific inventions and discoveries that were to shape decisively the historical experience of the coming century: wireless, radiation, the petrol engine, aviation and in medicine, to name but a few. International investment and trade underpinned the continent's economic strength and those who could afford to were able to travel freely across the continent, unimpeded by passport formalities or, for that matter, tiresome security checks.

Consumption and leisure were becoming increasingly accessible to society. The growing middle classes of Paris could enjoy shopping in the Bon Marché, Galeries Lafayette or at Au Printemps, Londoners could visit Harrods or from 1909 Selfridges, and the burghers of Berlin soon enough could enjoy a comparable experience in the city's great department store, KaDeWe (Kaufhaus des Westens). The seaside holiday or its equivalent was not just the privilege of the few, even if some traveled in third class railway carriages and lodged in cheap boarding houses, while others could enjoy the splendors of the grand hotels that sprang up along Europe's Atlantic and Mediterranean coasts.

Overcrowding and poverty weighed on many households in Europe's burgeoning cities, but dramatic improvements in public health and sanitation and rapid additions to the housing stock promised a more tolerable future. Modern urban transport networks made the dream of suburban living a reality for many and unemployment was relatively low in the industrialized regions of Europe, which continued to attract a stream of rural migrants. Illiteracy remained relatively widespread in Mediterranean and eastern Europe, but universal primary education had all but eliminated it in the center and northwest of the continent, where government was becoming increasingly accountable to an informed (male) electorate. Much was also changing in the workplace, as the principles of trade union representation and workplace consultation were conceded fitfully and unevenly in the industrialized economies and health and safety regulations were gradually tightened up.

One could embellish or add to this list of achievements almost indefinitely. If a certain *fin de siècle*, self-indulgent pessimism stalked the salons of the bored and wealthy and premonitions of doom haunted certain hypersensitive artists and intellectuals, this could not sweep away the underlying confidence of mainstream European society. Paris hosted a series of world fairs, at which France and the other exhibiting nations could show off their latest technological and artistic achievements. The 1889 World Fair had seen the construction of Gustave Eiffel's iconic wrought-iron tower, much criticized by architectural purists at the time and originally intended only to serve as a temporary structure for the duration of the fair itself. The 1900 fair was housed largely in the magnificent domed, iron and glass Grand Palais, decorated in art nouveau style, which encapsulated the unmistakable confidence and ambition of the Belle Époque, the golden age, of the early twentieth century.

Expressionist painters, such as Egon Schiele or Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, may have scandalized their more conservative contemporaries, Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque may have seen their prewar artistic efforts dismissed as "mere" cubism, the first concert performance in Paris of Igor Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* may have triggered fist fights within the audience, but such work reflected tellingly the accelerating pace of an increasingly urbanized, emancipated and metropolitan society. The French impressionist painters of the previous century had sometimes evoked a romantic past (in a radically novel fashion), but prewar expressionism was decidedly rooted in the present and looked to the future. Culture apart, in 1910 the German electric giant AEG commissioned the architect and industrial designer Peter Behrens to create the world's first coordinated corporate brand¹ as the evolution of a modern global economy gathered pace. France acknowledged the irresistible force of globalization when finally adopting Greenwich Mean Time in 1911.

Among the continent's prevailing political creeds, liberalism and socialism owed their credibility to an inherent belief in progress, and the willingness of conservatives to concede or even preempt reform spoke volumes. During the nineteenth century this self-confidence had combined with material and military strength to see Europe project its power worldwide, and by 1900 European imperialism neared the peak of its potential, dominating much of the globe. Even where Europeans did not rule directly, the continent's businessmen and financiers were ubiquitous as they invested, for example, in China, Turkey or Argentina, funding governments and developing trade across the globe. The City of London was central to this process, but Paris also played a major role and German capital strove to close the gap with these long-established imperial centers. Only the United States of America, itself the offspring of the European Enlightenment and peopled primarily by European immigrants and their descendants, promised to challenge Europe's position in any meaningful way.

The self-confidence of the age was reflected in a multitude of intimate, often minor, ways. In 1886 a doting uncle, a French bourgeois, sent his niece, Julie, an

idiosyncratic wedding present. He admitted that the set of account books lacked somewhat in romantic charm, but insisted that orderly book-keeping should shape and guide Julie's future life. As he continued:

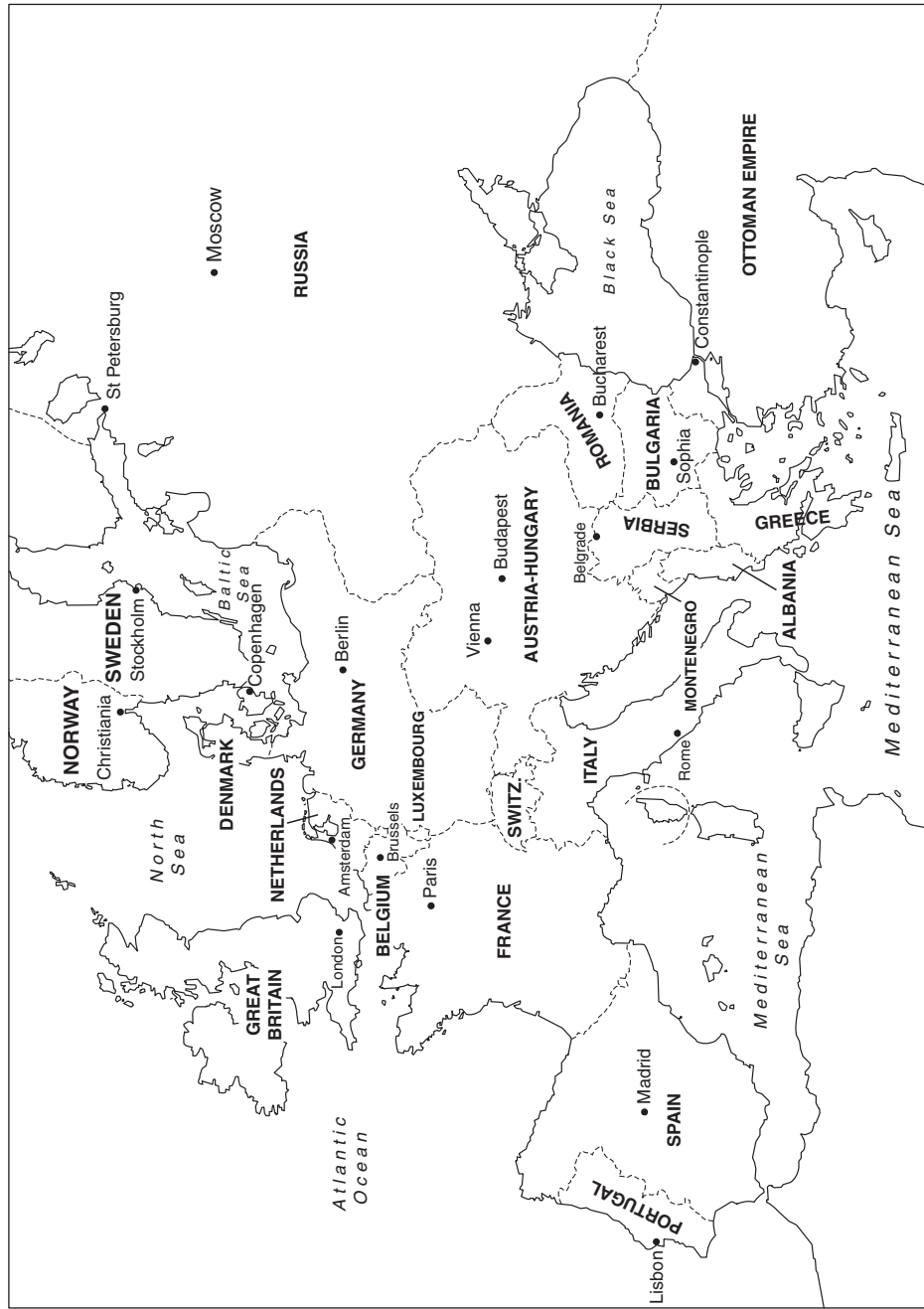
The second part of this book contains only blank paper. It is for recording at the year's end a detailed inventory of your assets. If all [your marital] expenses are deducted from your total fortune you will have the capital remaining to you when you arrive in Tunis, and which you will be able to add to, year by year, in order to provide your daughters with dowries.

But your fortune will vary not only with the level of your expenditure and receipts, but also with the rise and fall in the value of your investments. In order that you may know your real financial position you must note in this second part of the book each of your investments and its actual value at the time, according to its quoted price on the stock exchange.²

Investments could, indeed, fall, indicating that life was not without its risks. The European capitalist edifice had been built through the efforts of many losers as well as winners within an uneasy relationship between risk, struggle and reward. Interpretations of this process found their most extreme expression in the writings of so-called "social Darwinists," who argued that individual fortunes, and indeed the fortunes of entire societies, were defined by struggle and by the survival of the fittest. Such theories could and sometimes did assume racist overtones that also provided a spurious moral justification for the European colonization of other continents.

Julie's uncle, however, had confined his thoughts to financial prudence. Such was clearly called for, but any investment would have been reduced to a mere gamble unless one held an inherently optimistic view of the future. And indeed, underlying optimism defined the Europe of 1900, shared by countless middle-class and working-class families for whom inheritance, a profession, a trade, or honest labor provided the wherewithal for a morally upstanding life, whether affluent or modest. Most families placed assets, however large or small, on the stock market, in government securities, in cooperative savings banks, building societies, or friendly societies. Urban sophisticates mocked the apocryphal (or not so apocryphal) peasant who simply stashed whatever gold he could accumulate under the mattress without a thought to the returns offered by rational investment. Capitalism, to give this process a name, had become deeply and inextricably embedded in society's wider values. It only remained to be asked what might ensue, if this inherent faith in a calculable form of progress were ever to be fundamentally disrupted.

And soon enough, twentieth-century Europe witnessed a succession of hammer blows that shattered these certainties and much besides. Confidence in the efficacy of reform, the wisdom of compromise or tolerance, and, ultimately, respect for humanity itself buckled and broke. The First World War initiated this



Map 1.1 Europe 1914.

destructive process and the Second World War brought it to its culmination, for which the extermination camps at Auschwitz-Birkenau serve as harrowing shorthand. The devastation wrought by the First World War was rationalized by the hope that this was truly a “war to end all wars,” but beyond the unprecedented loss of life the crippling expense of modern warfare had rocked Europe’s economy to its foundations. The accumulated wealth of a century or more was dissipated as the value of money melted away and faith in money as a just reward for effort and a secure medium of exchange evaporated. Commentators such as the economist John Maynard Keynes feared for the very existence of liberal capitalist society.

This great inflation was at its most extreme in Germany (and the lands to its east) as pensions earned through a lifetime of hard and honest toil became worthless, as salaries that reflected expertise and professional dedication were reduced to a pittance, and as workers could no longer put bread and meat on the table because their pay packets had lost any meaningful value. During mid-1923 they or their wives struggled to find a trader or shopkeeper willing to accept banknotes that would be worthless within hours. An economic and financial crisis thus became a profoundly corrosive moral crisis, as Gerald Feldman once explained:

The [German] Republic [came] to be identified with the trauma of all those who had lost out and with the shameful practices of law, equity, and good faith that characterized the period. No less offensive than the misappropriation of money and goods, however, was the sense that there had been a misappropriation of spiritual values and a selling of what the *Bürgertum* [middle class] – above all the *Bildungsbürgertum* [the professional middle class] – held to be holy. The so-called ... histories of manners and morals of the inflation were simply an extension of this belief, so that the inflation added a powerful pornographic element to the political culture of Weimar with all the elements of shame and self-disgust and the projections onto others that came with it.³

Feldman continued that these traumas and the accompanying social and political disruption contributed to a tolerance of political violence and so of Nazism, with consequences that today are universally understood. After all, even the sordid process of Holocaust denial accepts by default that there is something that needs to be denied.

It is, therefore, tempting in the extreme simply to trace this history of apocalyptic decline to a zero hour or *Stunde nul*, from which life had to begin all over again in 1945. However, contemporary Europe owes far too much to its past to permit such an approach. Its deeper heritage remains profoundly ancient, modified and supplemented over millennia, but also during the decades with which we are concerned. This work will confront the paradox of this history as it traces and

evaluates much that shaped and is celebrated in contemporary Europe, but simultaneously confront the successive waves of darkness that enveloped the continent some two generations ago. War and peacemaking, modernity and nostalgic reaction, humanity and barbarity, and, of course, democracy and dictatorship all contributed decisively to the European experience of the earlier twentieth century.



Chapter Two

The Coming of War

2.1 A Balkans War

Austria-Hungary declared war against Serbia on July 28, 1914, and shelled the enemy capital, Belgrade, on the following day. The Third Balkan War of the early twentieth century had begun, but this time the hostilities engulfed Europe within days, drew in the European colonial empires, distant powers such as Japan, and, in 1917, the United States of America. This “Great War” or “World War,” as contemporaries named it, swept away ancient empires, unleashed convulsive revolutionary upheavals, and hardly seemed to respect the victors more than it did the vanquished. The catastrophe seemed all the greater and all the more bewildering since it defied an unmistakable improvement in wider European relations during the preceding few years, at any rate away from the Balkans. Even in 1914 the belligerents blamed each other for the mounting carnage and after the war the enduring question of “guilt” – especially German culpability – came to serve as more than an interpretation of the past. It also influenced the history of interwar Europe as countries shaped their foreign and even domestic policies around the assertion or denial of this guilt. As we shall see, the legacy of the Second World War with its history of unprecedented mass murder has since cast even darker shadows that extend back into the history of the pre-Nazi past as much as they still cloud the present.

The initial, regional conflict between Austria-Hungary and Serbia was triggered by a mix of Serbian ambition and Habsburg pessimism. Since 1815 the history of the Austrian (Habsburg) Empire had been punctuated by successive defeats and revolutions which saw Austria driven from much of Italy (1860 and 1867), excluded from the emergent Prussian-dominated German federation (1866–7), and forced to grant Hungary far-reaching autonomy (1867). The Austrian Empire was renamed Austria-Hungary in reflection of this, but Austrian-Hungarian tensions were not definitively resolved. Habsburg statesmen did manage to hold the Empire together and, Italy apart, maintain the boundaries negotiated by Metternich at the

Congress of Vienna in 1814–15, but in 1903 this tenuous equilibrium was disturbed by a coup d'état in Belgrade. King Alexander Obrenovic was assassinated and replaced by King Peter, of the rival Karadjordjevic family, who refused to accept Serbia's erstwhile position as an Austrian satellite. As tensions subsequently rose, Belgrade began to look toward France and Russia for support against Vienna.

This prompted Austria-Hungary to annex outright in 1908 the former Turkish (Ottoman) province of Bosnia-Herzegovina, which it had ruled since 1879, in order to assert its primacy in the region and also block any possible Serb expansion toward the Adriatic coastline. Bosnia, however, contained a sizeable Serbian population and had always been coveted by Belgrade. Regional tension rose further, accompanied by the formation of secret, luridly named Serb terrorist societies such as the Black Hand (otherwise known as Unity or Death). Dedicated to expelling the Austro-Hungarians from all Serbian lands, these societies recruited their membership from the backward, increasingly overpopulated Bosnian countryside, where grinding poverty readily bred widespread resentment against the Habsburg rulers and created a form of political extremism which owed much to the Russian anarchism of that time. Assassination, of course, formed an integral part of its political repertoire.

These tense relations were heightened by two short, sharp wars that broke out in the Balkans in 1912 and 1913. The first saw Greece, Bulgaria and Serbia join forces to drive the Ottoman Empire (already embroiled in a war with Italy over control of Libya) out of southeastern Europe. By the end of October 1912 the Balkan states were victorious, but yet again Austria-Hungary (and for that matter Italy) sought to prevent Serbia gaining a port on the Adriatic, which might provide a base for a rival great power. To block Serb ambitions, Vienna and Rome proposed that the Albanian peoples, who inhabited the coastal region between Montenegro to the north and Greece to the south, be given a state of their own. However, this was more easily said than done. The Serbs pushed on toward the sea, slaughtering Albanians as they went, kidnapped an Austro-Hungarian consular official in Macedonia, and appealed to Russia for support. Russia responded by carrying out a trial mobilization, while Austria-Hungary stiffened its garrisons in Galicia which bordered on Russian Poland. This time, however, war did not spread. By late November it was plain that Russian sympathy for Serbia did not extend to a readiness to use force, and Serbia itself had apologized to Austria for kidnapping an accredited diplomat. The collective of European great powers, or "Concert of Europe," moved to call closure on the crisis. An Ambassador's Conference was convened in London by the British Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey, which confirmed the existence of Albania.

However, despite some hard bargaining in London over Albania's borders with Montenegro and Serbia, which tended to favor the latter two states, Montenegro resented the proposed settlement and invaded northeastern Albania. The Concert of Europe appeared helpless as St Petersburg backed the Montenegrins, while Rome and Vienna backed the Albanians. On May 2, 1913 Austria-Hungary put its troops facing the Montenegrin border on a war footing, prompting the Balkan statelet to withdraw from Albania with alacrity. The Austro-Hungarian military

commander, Conrad von Hötzendorf, would have preferred a punitive war against the Habsburgs' southern Slav neighbors, but the Foreign Minister, Count Berchtold, observed that saber rattling had achieved in short order what the Concert of Europe, divided "between hostile Triple Entente colleagues [France, Russia, and Britain] and feeble Triple Alliance colleagues [Germany and Italy]"¹ could not. On May 30, 1913 the Treaty of London brought the upheaval of the First Balkan War to an end.

Within a matter of days, however, the Second Balkan War erupted as Bulgaria and Serbia fell out over their share of the spoils from the first conflict. Greece joined Serbia, and Bulgaria lost. This time the Austro-Hungarians remained onlookers, despite their pro-Bulgarian sympathies, hoping to salvage for their Bulgarian friends as much territory as possible once it came to peace negotiations. However the Habsburg Empire's principal ally, Germany, had other priorities. The Kaiser's brother-in-law sat on the Greek throne and, personal sympathies apart, Berlin was locked in a struggle with Paris for influence in Athens. Greece (and by implication Serbia) could not be offended and the Treaty of Bucharest of August 10, 1913 saw the collapse of Berchtold's pro-Bulgarian policy, enormous resentment in Vienna toward Berlin, Austrian despair over the traditional system of Concert diplomacy, and a growing conviction that further conflict was inevitable. The Emperor of Austria, Franz Joseph, observed bleakly: "The Treaty of Bucharest is untenable and we are moving towards another war. May God grant that it is confined to the Balkans."²

This war might have come in October 1913, for the Serbians, in defiance of the two freshly signed Balkan settlements, had again begun occupying Albanian territory. On October 17, without troubling to consult the other major powers, the Austro-Hungarians issued Belgrade with an ultimatum that allowed the Serbs eight days to quit Albania. Despite ruffled feathers in Rome and Paris no great power openly supported Serbia, forcing Belgrade to comply hastily with Vienna's demands. "Independent action," Bridge observes, "seemed after all to be the most effective means of defending the Monarchy's interests,"³ and in fairness, few alternatives were on offer. Despite a brief outburst of pro-Austrian enthusiasm in October 1913 in the wake of the latest Albanian crisis, Berlin's policy in the Balkans and Turkey was distinct from Vienna's, prompting Franz Joseph and Berchtold to undertake a major diplomatic offensive designed to reclaim German support. As Berchtold complained to his ambassador to Berlin in May 1914: "People in Berlin do not seem to have been able to free themselves ... from the idea of a political rapprochement between Austria-Hungary and Serbia – an idea which must be regarded as futile in view of the animosity towards Austria-Hungary deep-rooted in the Serbian national consciousness ..."⁴ In June he instructed Baron Matschenko, a senior official at the Ballhausplatz (Foreign Office), to set out a long-term diplomatic strategy for the Balkans. On June 24 Matschenko completed his draft, which urged Germany, finally, to coordinate its Balkan policy with that of Austria-Hungary, envisaged a potential Austro-German-Bulgarian-Turkish alliance in the region, and sought to convince Berlin that the differences between Vienna and Belgrade were irreconcilable.

This program sought essentially to stabilize the Balkans through peaceful if robust diplomacy, but within days events were to demand something very different. On June 28, 1914 the heir to the Habsburg throne, the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, and his wife Sophie made an official visit to the Bosnian capital, Sarajevo, where they were killed by students associated with the Black Hand. The initial attempt to kill the Archduke was botched and it was only when one of the failed assassins, Gavrilo Princip, later stumbled on the official motorcade that he succeeded in shooting the royal couple. This outrage radicalized the mood in Vienna so dramatically that the Ballhausplatz's existing diplomatic strategy was immediately rendered redundant. Its shock effect combined with longer term tensions and attitudes to precipitate the outbreak of the Austro-Serbian War on July 28, a war whose approach the respective governments appeared to welcome as much as they feared.

Serbs understood their history as a process of victimhood, martyrdom and ultimate resurrection analogous in some ways to Christ's passion on the cross. As the newspaper *Straza* commented at Easter 1914:

The year 1908 likewise signifies for us a Good Friday, which was followed in 1912–13 by the Resurrection ... and the Easter festival of the whole Serbian people too, the day of national unification, which will gather into one state all who speak Serbian, is no longer far off. There, across the Save and the Danube ... languish Slavs who look out on today's great Christian festival in sorrow, seeking to discern the gleam of Serbian bayonets, for these form their only hope of a final resurrection.⁵

On June 28 the Serb nation observed the festival of Vivodan, the anniversary of the great medieval Battle of Kosovo at which the Ottoman Turks had overwhelmed the Serbian kingdom and thereafter placed most of the Balkans under Ottoman rule. Now the Turks had gone, but the Austro-Hungarians threatened at best to retain control over territories claimed by Serbia, at worst to replace the Ottomans as masters of all Serbia. Thus in early 1914 the extreme nationalist journal *Pijemont* described the recent recovery of Kosovo as a "victory of the Serb national consciousness which has preserved the memory of Kosovo and which in the future must conquer in Bosnia just as it conquered in Macedonia."⁶

These ambitions might have been controlled, for although the Serbian Prime Minister Nikola Pašić supported the vision of a south Slavonic, or Yugoslav, federation, he believed its realization to lie a generation or two in the future. For the moment, reconciliation with Serbia's aggravated, northern Habsburg neighbor seemed the most prudent course, especially since the Russians had been reluctant to support Serbia too strongly during the series of recent crises. Unfortunately, however, Pašić's administration was locked in a struggle with the military over who should have primacy in Serbia. The Serbian army chiefs were altogether more hawkish, flushed with recent military success and in some cases fixated on the Yugoslav mission. The head of Serbian Military Intelligence, Colonel Dragutin Dimitrijević, even moonlighted as leader of the Black Hand and, as such, actively fostered terrorist activity on Austro-Hungarian territory. To Pašić's consternation,

Dimitrijević had instructed frontier officials to help two armed students to slip into Bosnia on June 2, prompting the Prime Minister to open a secret inquiry into the spy chief's activities. Meanwhile, the wider struggle between politicians and military culminated in a call for elections, set for August 14. During the ensuing Sarajevo crisis therefore, Pašić found himself caught between the need to conciliate an enraged Austria-Hungary, and yet indulge in the nationalist rhetoric that any Serbian election campaign demanded. As Mark Cornwall observes, "Serbian prodding of the [Habsburg] tiger continued in the weeks after Sarajevo and even Pašić himself (albeit unwittingly) could not avoid indulging in it."⁷

That said, his little state was hardly in a position to attack its mighty northern neighbor, leaving the decisions for war to be taken in Vienna, not Belgrade. For a century or more Habsburg statesmen had struggled to oppose nationalist challenges to their multinational empire. In 1866 such threats had driven Austria to war against Italy in an effort to retain possession of Venice. As the Foreign Minister, Count Mensdorff, had explained to the British ambassador of the day: "The result of war might be that Austria would be dismembered, perhaps destroyed, but she must defend herself and her rights or fail in the attempt to do so, and was resolved not to acknowledge the principle of nationalities ..."⁸ The underlying issues remained unchanged in July 1914 when a comparable form of pessimistic, even fatalistic determination drove Austro-Hungarian policy toward war. "If we must go under, we better go under decently," as the aged Franz Joseph declared, and Conrad von Hötzendorf echoed these sentiments when predicting that: "It will be a hopeless struggle, but nevertheless it must be because such an ancient monarchy cannot perish ingloriously."⁹ Even after the event there were few regrets. "We had to die," as Count Czernin later commented, "but we could choose the means of our death, and we chose the most terrible."¹⁰

These were the sentiments of the handful of senior diplomats, politicians and military men who dominated an empire which, Franz Joseph had observed several months earlier, could not be governed by parliamentary means. In March 1914 the Austrian parliament, or Reichsrat, had been suspended after sustained disruption at the hands of minority nationalities, in particular the Czechs. These decision makers neglected even to consult the economic elite, the country's bankers and industrialists, who remained largely unaware of the gathering storm until they were summoned to the Finance Ministry on 23 July to be briefed and instructed to prevent a stock market panic. That these bourgeois gentlemen favored a peaceful policy of commercial collaboration in the Balkans and beyond was of little interest to Austria-Hungary's political masters; wider political opinion mattered even less so long as it did not disrupt the empire's stability.¹¹

Alois Count Lexa von Aehrenthal served as Austro-Hungarian Foreign Minister until his death in late 1912 and had annexed Bosnia-Herzegovina in October 1908. Despite his expansionist Balkan policy and despite his willingness to push things to the brink, Aehrenthal possessed considerable finesse, transferred "decisions over war and peace to his opponents,"¹² and in so doing had managed to avert war altogether. A coterie of younger diplomats at the Ballhausplatz had cut their teeth

under Aehrenthal's guidance and identified with his longer term program of Habsburg dominance in the Balkans. However, when Berchtold succeeded Aehrenthal, he initially favored a more consensual approach through the tried and tested medium of the Concert of Europe. Berchtold had previously been posted to St Petersburg, where, in 1908, he experienced Russian fury over Aehrenthal's unilateral annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina at first hand. However, although firmly committed to the Concert of Europe and despite a German ultimatum to Russia in 1909 in support of Vienna, he subsequently became dismayed at the German indifference to Austria-Hungary's vital interests, and even more so at the failure of the Concert to resolve the Balkan crises in a manner and on terms acceptable to the Habsburg Empire. With his country neglected by its fair-weather friends and ill served by wider European diplomacy, Berchtold fell increasingly under the influence of Aehrenthal's protégés, who remained committed to a forward foreign policy, but lacked their mentor's subtle touch. The death of Franz Ferdinand touched Berchtold personally, compounding his sense of despair and wiping away any remaining ability or even desire to counsel moderation.

As war fever swept the Ballhausplatz, Berchtold redrafted the Matschenko Memorandum, transforming it into a case for immediate hostilities against Serbia. Rumors spread, prompting the German ambassador to Vienna to warn Berlin on 30 June: "Here I often hear even serious people expressing the wish that Serbia ... be sorted out once and for all."¹³ On July 5 the redrafted memorandum was delivered to Berlin in person by the Austro-Hungarian Chef de Cabinet, Count Alexander Hoyos, and this time his German counterparts did not disappoint. Berlin not only offered unqualified support, but urged Vienna to move swiftly against Serbia (of which more later). This was hugely significant, for the Austro-Hungarians at best feared and at worst expected that this time Russia would back Serbia. Vocal German support promised to hold back the Russians, and it has been argued that had Berlin vetoed the whole adventure at this critical point a European war would have been averted.

However that still begs the question of what Vienna would have done even without Berlin's blessing. Immediately after the war the former Habsburg diplomat Count Andrian-Werburg conceded that: "We started the war, not the Germans and even less the Entente – that I know. ... I myself was in lively agreement with the basic idea that only a war could save Austria."¹⁴ Historians of the Habsburg Empire largely agree, with Evans observing that: "Vienna was certainly not waiting for instructions; indeed, the Habsburg capital exhibited a rare harmony of its military and civil leadership,"¹⁵ or as Fellner remarks: "The will to this third Balkan War dominated the thoughts and actions of Austrian politicians and military men."¹⁶ Ironically, the very assassination of Franz Ferdinand had not merely provided the pretext for war, but also removed from Austrian public life the figure most likely to oppose such a strategy.

Following Hoyos's return from Berlin, the Austro-Hungarian Cabinet met on 7 July to finalize its strategy, and despite serious and sustained misgivings on the part of the Hungarian Minister President, Count Tisza, it decided for war. No one

professed to have any faith in future Serbian assurances, for those given after the 1908 Bosnian crisis had now been broken. Radical newspapers in Belgrade had already praised Princip as a martyr, highlighted Habsburg oppression in Bosnia, and deplored the stupidity of Franz Ferdinand in visiting Sarajevo on Vivovdan, of all days, which hardly served to lighten the mood in the Austro-Hungarian capital. Immediately after the Cabinet meeting Berchtold warned the ambassador to Belgrade, Baron von Giesl, that an ultimatum would be prepared and that: "However the Serbs react to [it], you must break off relations and it must come to war."¹⁷ However, in Fellner's estimation there was a grotesque mismatch between Austro-Hungarian belligerence and its actual military preparedness, forcing the Chief of the General Staff, von Hötendorf, to "beg for at least three weeks' grace in order to take the necessary mobilisation measures."¹⁸ This rendered obsolete Berlin's call on July 5 for swift action, which had been designed to present Europe with a fait accompli and thus resolve the crisis. In the event it was a good fortnight later, on July 23, that the ultimatum (painstakingly designed to be rejected) was finally dispatched. The Serbian reply of July 25 was conciliatory, but "in fact still full of reservations,"¹⁹ for Belgrade had already begun to mobilize and was prepared to run the risk of a localized war rather than return to its pre-1903 status as an Austrian satellite. Serbia had appealed to Russia for help on July 23, but the first material evidence that St Petersburg might support Belgrade militarily only came after the ultimatum had run its course. The Serbian government moved from Belgrade (on the frontier with Austria-Hungary) to Nis, while von Giesl left Belgrade for Vienna as soon as he had presented the ultimatum.

On July 27 Berchtold urged the Emperor to declare war without delay, explaining that it was "not impossible that the Triple Entente Powers might yet try to achieve a peaceful solution of the conflict unless a clear situation is created by a declaration of war."²⁰ The stage fright exhibited in other major European capitals during these final, fateful days appears to have been altogether lacking in Vienna, with the Austro-Hungarian declaration of war following on July 28. A day later Habsburg forces bombarded Belgrade even though any effective military action was untenable before mid-August. Neither side was blind to the potential international ramifications of their collision course, but Austrian fatalism and Serbian pan-Slavonic ambition drove them to accept these risks, however they might crystallize over the coming days or weeks.

2.2 Why the War Need Not Have Spread

Given that the initial, regional conflict involved Austria-Hungary and Serbia, its spread assumed a seemingly curious pattern.²¹ Between August 1 and 4 Germany plunged into war against the Triple Entente of Russia, France, and Britain, with hostilities between Austria-Hungary and the Entente powers only following a

week or two later. A. J. P. Taylor once described this wider conflict as the first German war, and whatever its name, Germany is almost invariably regarded as the key player. It was Germany that defeated Russia and imposed a punitive peace on the nascent Soviet Union in 1918; it was the German army that fought the great set-piece battles on the western front and was ultimately defeated there by France, Britain and the USA. Thereafter it is the November 1918 armistice with Germany and the subsequent treaty between Germany and the Allies, signed at Versailles in 1919, which remain fixed in the collective popular and institutional memory and dominate the histories of the period. And Britain for one went to war not to uphold Serbian rights, nor would it ever have done so, but because the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary of the day were not prepared to see France defeated and subordinated by Germany.

Many historians, therefore, tend to see the Balkans crisis, and particularly the murder of Franz Ferdinand, as incidental, serving as a pretext for wider European or even global conflict that had very different roots from the forces that drove Austria-Hungary and Serbia to war. Hostilities on the grand scale invite comparably grandiose explanations, in this case all the more so given that the origins of the even more devastating 1939–45 war lay partly in this earlier Great War. Capitalism, imperialism, the European alliance system, the arms race, autocracy, or antagonistic relations between different European powers have variously been held to blame. Following the seminal publications of a German historian, Fritz Fischer, in the 1960s and 1970s,²² attention focused on Germany. The very course of German history, the character of Germany's leadership, of its government and institutions, came to dominate the debate (to the exclusion, some complained, of much else). All of this might appear to leave consideration of any factors that militated against the outbreak of hostilities superfluous at best, but the history of prewar Europe involved more than a conscious or unconscious march to war. The continent was home to many optimists in 1914 and a brief consideration of the case against a wider conflict pays fuller justice to the history of the time, and also offers certain insights into the broader pattern of the twentieth-century European story.

In June 1913, just weeks before his own death, the eminent German Social Democrat August Bebel assured the Second [Socialist] International that the prospects for peace were excellent. No doubt the Bern Meeting of May 1913 was at the back of his mind, when 214 French and German parliamentarians, mostly socialists, had met in the Swiss capital. General declarations of goodwill were followed in November by a joint meeting of the same group in Germany's Reichstag, where they agreed to form a standing committee to work for continued peaceful relations between France and Germany. Little of substance followed, but increasingly close relations had developed within the Second International between the mighty Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) and the newly formed (1905) French Section of the Workers' International (SFIO) or French Socialist Party, led by Jean Jaurès.

However, Bebel's optimism had different roots, given that neither in France and still less in Germany did the socialists make foreign policy. Indeed the German constitution explicitly excluded the elected house of parliament, the Reichstag, let alone its socialist members, from determining the country's external relations. That was a matter for the Kaiser and his ministers, the latter not members of the Reichstag. Furthermore, despite vague talk of strikes to prevent any effective mobilization, the International had not managed to articulate any concrete strategy for avoiding a future war, in part to avoid trespassing on national prerogatives and in part because Europe's socialists were, at the end of the day, staunch advocates of a defensive patriotism. It was even suggested by one French delegate (although the notion was repudiated by Jaurès) that the SPD had gone further and bought into the German government's imperialist goals.

Thus Bebel was looking elsewhere, concluding that: "The greatest guarantee for the preservation of the world today is found in the international investments of capitalism."²³ This would have surprised the Russian Bolshevik leader, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, who in 1916 was to conclude that imperialism, and (as he saw it) the resulting Great War, represented the highest stage of capitalism. Lenin's analysis owed much to an earlier, non-Marxist British work, J. A. Hobson's *Imperialism*,²⁴ and whatever the historical validity of either analysis, imperialism was widely perceived as a major threat in 1913. Examples there were aplenty, for the war between Britain and the Boer Republics, Russian ambitions in Asia, German resentment at arriving too late at the imperialist feast, and a series of crises in North Africa with French involvement the common denominator had contributed significantly to international tension from the 1880s onward. Germany's burgeoning economic power also provoked hostile reactions from its continental neighbors, whether from France, or from Russia which by 1914 particularly resented Germany's dominant role in its external trade. Much of the resulting angst could be found in Britain where, Paul Kennedy notes, a Social Darwinistic attitude to international economic relations prevailed in prewar political circles. International prowess and internal economic dynamism were regarded as synonymous, with the British Conservative politician Leo Amery commenting: "Those people who have the industrial power and the power of invention and science will be able to defeat all others."²⁵ Britain, Kennedy observes, had indeed dominated the entire global economy during the earlier nineteenth century, but the race for colonies during the latter half of the century had left it with formal economic and political control over just a quarter of the globe, "which was not a good bargain, despite the continued array of fresh acquisitions to Queen Victoria's dominions."²⁶

Politicians and businessmen unwittingly betrayed Britain's relative economic decline when lamenting the allegedly nefarious practices adopted by German competitors in the British home market, and also the German economy's growing global reach. However, complaining was one thing and fighting quite another, for British businessmen understood that the country would suffer devastating material

losses in any major European conflict and regarded such a possibility with deep foreboding. The writer Ralf Lane (alias Norman Angell) depicted the economic and financial devastation that any conflict would bring, predicting that under the circumstances war was sustainable for nine months at most.²⁷ For its part the British financial community feared instability above all else, given its considerable exposure to international debtors and creditors who might default on their debts or repatriate their assets at the first hint of serious trouble. The Bank of England itself was similarly concerned for it functioned as the linchpin of the global financial system, and such was the confidence in its creditworthiness that the Bank had never troubled to hold sufficient gold to cover its liabilities. However, were the threat of war to trigger panicky withdrawals by French and German banks, among others, Britain's finances would be crippled as the Bank's limited supplies of gold were quickly exhausted. As for trade, a quarter of British imports came from Germany and the Baltic, leading official committees of enquiry to conclude in 1911 and 1912 that in a prolonged German war, this trade might have to be resumed to keep the economy going. (No one thought to ask if Berlin would prove so altruistic in these circumstances.) Then there were domestic tensions. A series of major industrial strikes in Britain and an ominous stand-off between nationalists and unionists in Ireland over the issue of Home Rule further convinced government ministers that war could only add to their problems. In 1913 it was agreed that 6,000 regular troops would remain at home to guard key buildings in wartime and 5,000 rifles were reserved for police use. Thus John Morley subsequently remarked in Cabinet on August 2, 1914: "The atmosphere of war cannot be friendly to order, in a democratic system that is verging on the humour of 1848."²⁸ Governments elsewhere in Europe were similarly uneasy and contemplated the mass arrest of political radicals and other troublemakers should hostilities break out.

Further to these practicalities, British economic life was underpinned ideologically by classical economic liberalism, which had little time for military adventure. Few in Britain would have argued against the maintenance of a powerful navy, given the country's global commitments, but nonetheless the eighteenth-century Scottish political economist Adam Smith had regarded the military as little more than "menial servants" who, lacking any productive role, needed to be maintained at the "lowest level commensurate with national safety."²⁹ His nineteenth-century English counterpart, John Stuart Mill, went further, arguing that commerce between nations would in any case render war obsolete.³⁰ For sure a body of very different, early twentieth-century literature accompanied a spy mania as British authors imagined a future German-British confrontation, among which Erskine Childers' *The Riddle of the Sands* is possibly the most famous.³¹ Some authors even feared a British defeat, with Ernest Oldmeadow imagining "the Germans wooing their new vassals with universal Christmas gifts and subsidised food. Indeed, the worst atrocities ... are the introduction of a diet of sausages and sauerkraut, the correct spelling of Handel's name in concert programmes and Home Rule for Ireland."³² However, others, including the satirical magazine *Punch*, lampooned this war and

spy scare literature, and authors such as H. G. Wells came out against any conflict. And when it came to substantive personal and cultural ties, British society remained closely linked to that of Germany, as witnessed among other things by the German students attending Oxford University in early 1914, or by the connections and intermarriage between British and German middle- and upper-class families. The Anglo-German Schlegel family of E. M. Forster's novel *Howards End*, while obviously fictitious, would not have appeared exceptional to his readers, for as Richard Cobb observes, such liaisons "were much commoner and apparently more generally acceptable than Anglo-French ones" before the 1914 war.³³

Turning to the continent, such intimate cultural or social links scarcely existed between France and Germany, for the latter's victory in the 1870–1 Franco-Prussian War had left its legacy. National stereotyping was common even in educated circles, with many in France perceiving the German monarchy as inherently bellicose, while Germans feared that their French neighbors remained fixated on revenge for defeat and for the loss of Alsace and northeastern Lorraine to Germany after a century or more of French rule. France's humiliation at the hands of Prussia had certainly left deep wounds, encapsulated in Edouard Detaille's painting, *Le Rêve* (the dream). Finished in 1888, the work depicts French soldiers billeted and asleep at night while on maneuvers, as a ghostly dream-like form of Napoleon's all-conquering Grande Armée sweeps irresistibly across the heavens, banners flying, offering the vision of renewed and restored national glory.³⁴ "Incidents," involving the likes of hapless lost balloonists or travelers suspected of spying, continued to punctuate the course of relations in the Franco-German borderlands, but that said, the passage of time witnessed a growing acceptance by French opinion that Alsace in particular had lost any real interest in returning to France. The constitutional settlement of May 1911, which granted the provinces greater autonomy within Germany and established a state parliament (Landtag) in Strassburg, appeared to mark the way forward. The French historian Charles Sancerme observed in 1913 that the Alsace, or "das Elsass" as it called itself, had effectively abandoned protest against annexation, instead seeking integration within Germany. "In truth," he remarked, "a protest against its race and real fatherland simply could not go on forever, and furthermore would not even be natural." The future, Sancerme continued, lay in a Franco-German entente which would include an autonomous, but German, Alsace-Lorraine/Elsass-Lothringen as part of the accord.³⁵

With the climate easing, some 80,000 Germans had come to reside in Paris before the war, reciprocated by a smaller French presence in Berlin, and complemented by a limited volume of tourism in each direction. Beyond this, the aristocracies of the two countries were interrelated to a degree. During his visit to St Petersburg in July 1914, the French President, Raymond Poincaré, found time to chat with the German ambassador to Russia, Count Friedrich von Pourtales: "He asked him about the French origins of his family, his wife's relationship to the Castellanes [family], a motor tour which the Count and Countess were proposing to make through Provence and particularly Castellane etc. Not a word about politics," as the

French ambassador recorded in his diary.³⁶ This conversation, like much of the correspondence between French and German grandees, was conducted in French, still at that time the official diplomatic language and lingua franca of European high society, but it was heavy industry and commerce rather than blood ties or culture that lay at the heart of Franco-German relations before 1914.

In April 1911 the German trade attaché in Paris, Otto Weber, detailed the growing collaboration between the great industrial houses of both nations, their increasing reliance on joint funding initiatives, and concluded that these “companies are delighted at the success of their cooperative ventures.”³⁷ Weber foresaw the day when a united Franco-German metallurgical industry, under German leadership, would take on its North American rivals for dominance in global markets, a notion echoed by the liberally inclined commercial lobbyists of the Hansabund when they advocated closer European cooperation to “enable us and our neighboring countries to safeguard our export markets in competition with extra-European states.”³⁸ The electrical engineering magnate Walther Rathenau similarly advocated a broad central European trading bloc, located within a multilateral global economy, to compensate for Germany’s lack of raw materials.³⁹ Individual German firms were in reality far too busy fighting each other for positions in the French market to unite behind a coherent geopolitical agenda, but egotistical interests did serve to fashion an internationally integrated Franco-German economy by default in which “the process of cooperation rapidly create[d] a situation through which, if one of the two parties is to survive, both must survive; if one perishes, both perish.”⁴⁰

The explosive growth of heavy industry in western Germany, most notably in the Ruhr District, the Saarland, and Lothringen (German Lorraine) lay at the heart of this relationship. From 1897 Germany became a net importer of iron ore and individual firms sought to avoid overdependence on existing Swedish suppliers by turning to their western neighbor. Thus in 1900 just 2 percent of German ore was sourced from France, but by early 1914 this proportion had grown to almost a third. The Ruhr steel baron August Thyssen, for one, therefore began to seek out French iron ore fields, in part to serve his huge new blast furnaces at Hagendingen, which stood within a stone’s throw of the Franco-German frontier. Thyssen’s corporate operations in France extended from the Briey iron ore fields, from where Hagendingen was supplied by an overhead cable railway, to ore fields and smelters south of Cherbourg in Normandy. Thyssen was aware that a symbiotic relationship was developing between France with its rich deposits of iron ore and Germany with its unrivaled deposits of coking coal (vital in the production of steel) and hoped that this would evolve into a European trading economy free from the distractions of national-political rivalries. His French subsidiaries operated under the chairmanship of a Frenchman, Louis de Chatelier, and of de Chatelier’s seven directors a maximum of three were Germans from Thyssen himself, the remainder French. This politically astute balancing act was sufficient to reassure the French government that the resulting operation was of private and

commercial significance rather than posing any strategic threat, but Thyssen (no doubt with an eye to future profits) aspired to more than this. These collaborative ventures, he hoped, might serve as “the foundation stone of a lasting accord and contribute to the improvement of relations between our two countries,”⁴¹ while his son, Fritz, speaking in Normandy in 1912, similarly hoped that Franco-German economic integration would render war between the two former enemies obsolete. The French nationalist author Louis Bruneau was sufficiently convinced of Thyssen’s bona fides to conclude that: “One must grant each activity ... its due and so recognize with complete justice that M. Thyssen’s are truly prodigious.”⁴² Thyssen’s French ventures were matched by those of Emil Kirdorf’s Gelsenkirchener Mining Company, Paul Reusch’s Gutehoffnungshütte (metallurgy), and Hugo Stinnes’s Deutsch-Lux (metallurgy) which acquired iron ore holdings in French Lorraine and Normandy, as well as in Luxembourg. The German chemical giants had similarly acquired a significant presence in France through a network of subsidiaries.

Efforts followed by German companies to obtain listings on the Paris bourse, as well as to establish a German chamber of commerce in the French capital. The newspapers *Echo de Paris* and *Le Temps* led a press campaign against these moves, while the French ambassador to London, Paul Cambon, fulminated: “They will take our money, but will remain our enemies.”⁴³ Oblivious to all of this, it seems, French consumers continued to snap up German imports as trade between the two neighbors grew by over 50 percent between 1907 and 1913. However, this trading relationship was less one-sided than its French critics assumed, for by 1912 Germany constituted France’s third largest export market and a similar reciprocity applied to wider economic relations. In comparison to France or Britain, Germany had relatively modest volumes of capital at its disposal for overseas investment, thus necessitating the use of French banking houses to fund German investments in France to the tune of 16 billion francs. The servicing of these loans, of course, saw a proportion of German company earnings flow into the coffers of the French financial sector. Furthermore, French industrialists did not pass up the opportunity to invest in Germany and therefore regarded any protectionist or Germanophobic outbursts with deep suspicion. The Comité des Forges de France (metallurgy) dismissed the anti-German press campaign as “the impact of an exaggerated nationalism,”⁴⁴ and joined with the Comité des Houillères de France (coal mining) to oppose any government regulation of foreign participation in French industry. Despite some mutual Franco-German economic sanctions in the wake of the Moroccan crises (1905 and 1911), French businesses contrasted the French government’s protectionist attitude with the more liberal (and for them preferable) character of the Prussian law of June 1909. Among them was the glass manufacturer St Gobain which had built up a significant holding in Germany. Given their community of interest with German counterparts within a plethora of international consortia, French companies were particularly fearful that their own government’s protectionist instincts might provoke comparable countermeasures abroad.

In this regard, high quality coal was the most valuable commodity Germany had on offer. France was becoming increasingly reliant on its eastern neighbor for supplies of hard coal to the point where a rumor did the rounds that France's great eastern border fortresses depended on German coal deliveries to remain operational. Furthermore, by 1913 the French metallurgical industry was almost entirely dependent on the Ruhr District for coke, leading soon enough to French investment in this prime industrial region of Germany. Much of this activity involved the huge, but family-owned de Wendel metallurgical combine, which found itself in a particularly ambivalent position after the 1870 Franco-Prussian war. The revised Franco-German frontier ran (inadvertently) through the very middle of the company's operations in Lorraine, complicating enormously the issue of patriotic loyalty for this staunchly French family. Thus one of the founder's grandsons (Robert) took German nationality, while family members sat in the Reichstag and the French National Assembly respectively. The German authorities looked on the company's largely Francophile politics with some suspicion, but did nothing to hinder the expanding and largely excellent relations between de Wendel and its German counterparts. As massive consumers of coking coal, therefore, the de Wendels extended their operations into the Ruhr and Westphalia, and cooperated there with German companies in various infrastructural schemes, prompting the French journalist Auguste Pawlowski to conclude: "We have interests in German mines. The Germans have the same in French mines. What could be fairer?"⁴⁵ Nothing, it would seem, leading Walther Rathenau to write to Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg shortly after the outbreak of war to urge a speedy and conciliatory peace with France, for "occupation and the transfer of property in France would, in Rathenau's opinion, be more trouble than they were worth."⁴⁶

This Franco-German nexus, which included a new commercial treaty in 1911, appears particularly poignant given the desolate state of affairs from 1914 onward, but German business interests of a comparable kind had been established in most parts of Europe. Thus Hugo Stinnes's ventures extended beyond his investments in Luxembourg and France to include a much wider global network of shipping, mining and electrical generation interests, reaching from the Americas, through Britain, to Russia and the Middle East. His metallurgical and engineering ventures may have profited from Germany's armaments program, but Stinnes remained unconvinced about such business, resenting the damage done to German competitiveness on international markets by the fiscal demands of the government's naval program in particular. The Hamburg banker Max Warburg was among prominent businessmen who expressed similar concerns, contrasting France and Britain's fiscal strength with Germany's fiscal and financial weakness, which led in turn to excessive and potentially ruinous government borrowing. And war itself posed unacceptable risks for the likes of Stinnes, prompting him in 1911 to lecture the leader of the imperialistic and belligerent Pan German League, Heinrich Class, on its futility. Germany's future lay in its economic rather than its military power, Stinnes insisted, explaining that he employed foreigners to front his growing

network of overseas operations, among which his Welsh coal mine supplied the Royal Navy and also exported coal to Italy on British ships flying the German flag. Little had changed in 1913, when he took the opportunity to buy up further mining interests in Yorkshire and Nottinghamshire, and in April 1914 Stinnes regarded the business potential of Serbia and Bulgaria as inviting. A decade of peace in the Balkans beckoned, or so he believed. In July 1914 he observed anxiously that war would constitute "an immense financial and economic catastrophe with dangerous social possibilities,"⁴⁷ and must have been greatly reassured when his son wrote to him from London on July 22 that British–German relations were on the mend.

Turning to the European powers' imperialist adventures, a series of crises, and also the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–5 over territory in northeastern China and Korea, had defined relations around the turn of the century. In 1898 French and British forces had come close to conflict over control of the southern Sudan (the Fashoda incident), while relations were tense on the boundaries between the British and Russian empires from east to west across the length of Asia. The British attack on the South African Boer Republics and the ensuing Boer War (1899–1902) caused outrage throughout continental Europe, while shortly thereafter in 1905 and 1911 French encroachments on Moroccan sovereignty prompted ill-advised German countermeasures that appeared to threaten the peace of Europe itself.

In the event, however, the European powers invariably sought to mediate colonial disputes rather than resort to force of arms, leading to a situation by 1914 where major disagreements had either been resolved, or set aside. The Fashoda incident, for example, initially led France and Britain separately to consider reaching some form of agreement with Germany, but thoughts quickly turned to mending fences with each other. Commercial relations had been flourishing for some years, and successful visits by Edward VII to Paris in May 1903 and the French President Loubert, Prime Minister Delcassé and Colonial Minister Étienne to London in July were followed by a series of colonial arbitration agreements. The resulting Entente Cordiale of April 1904 regulated spheres of influence in Southeast Asia, off Newfoundland, and across the northern half of the African continent where, in secret clauses, France was given the green light in Morocco in return for Spain acquiring the north coast of that country and for Britain gaining a free hand in Egypt. Thus Fashoda, far from precipitating war, had led swiftly to a far-reaching Franco-British rapprochement. As the Quai d'Orsay (French Foreign Ministry) appreciated (and as we shall see), this promised to draw Britain into continental power rivalries by ranging it alongside France and so against Germany. Few in Britain appreciated this in 1904, but the anti-German dimension of the Entente was strengthened by the conclusion of the Russo-British Entente of 1907 which, on the face of it, merely regulated colonial disputes between the signatories.

The two Moroccan Crises marked the nadir of relations between the European great powers in the years preceding the Great War. Morocco was an independent state in the northwest corner of Africa, from which Europe (Spain) was visible across the Strait of Gibraltar on a fine day. Its public finances and internal stability

left something to be desired, but mineral wealth, trade and agriculture offered foreign investors possibilities and an "open door" approach to commercial dealings and trade with Morocco had therefore been agreed between the European powers. France, however, had already annexed neighboring Algeria and Tunisia and now sought to extend its dominions westward to Morocco's Atlantic coast. Italy had resented France's seizure of Tunisia in 1881, but in 1899 Delcassé offered Rome commercial privileges in Tunisia and in 1900 a free hand in the Ottoman province of Tripoli (Libya) if France, implicitly, was allowed a free hand in Morocco. Italy concurred and Paris obtained further reassurances from Rome in November 1902. Meanwhile Delcassé had in secret agreed provisionally with his Spanish counterpart a partition of Morocco in October 1902 which offered Spain the north coast and France the remainder of the country.

The desolate finances of the Sultan of Morocco did the rest. During 1903 and 1904 substantial French loans were advanced to his government, the latter under French supervision and administration and bearing a heavy burden of interest payable over 36 years. With a French foot now firmly wedged in the Moroccan door, Madrid and Paris formalized their partition agreement on October 3, 1904, by which time German suspicions had been aroused. Although Delcassé had been careful to offer Spain, Britain and Italy compensation, he had neglected even to keep Berlin informed, yet in 1904 Germany conducted over 11 percent of Morocco's foreign trade (as against France's 30 percent) and was the second shipping power in the Sultanate, after Britain. After lengthy deliberation, the German authorities decided to make a gesture of support for the Sultan. The Kaiser had planned to spend April 1905 at his private villa on Corfu and was persuaded against his better judgment by Chancellor Bülow to land briefly at Tangier. Bülow, however, had urged the Kaiser to be noncommittal, instead of which the latter, always impetuous when discretion should have formed the better part of valor, blurted out his support for Moroccan independence and insisted that an open door trading policy be maintained. A year and a half of stormy diplomacy followed before the matter was settled at the Algeiras Conference of January 1906. The United States had shown a limited degree of sympathy toward Germany, with President Roosevelt later speaking of that "unbelievable scamp" Delcassé,⁴⁸ and on June 6, 1905 the French Premier, Maurice Rouvier, responded to German pressure by removing Delcassé from the Foreign Ministry. However, the British authorities took exception to Germany's bluster, which was intended in part to destabilize the recently concluded Anglo-French Entente by exposing its ineffectiveness in time of crisis. Edward VII made a further visit to Paris in May 1905 to demonstrate his government's support and at Algeiras Britain was among the clear majority of powers that supported the French position. Germany had landed a few blows, but France, as Frederick Schuman once observed, had now indeed drawn Britain into continental politics and so "terminated the diplomatic hegemony of Germany and ... created a coalition which could defy the Triple Alliance."⁴⁹

Matters took a further turn for the worse in April 1911 when Paris intervened directly in Moroccan disturbances by occupying the cities of Rabat and Fez and invoking the partition agreement with Spain. The German Foreign Minister, Alfred von Kiderlen-Wächter, responded in July 1911 by sending the ageing gunboat *Panther* to Agadir as a marker of Germany's interests in the region, only to trigger a major crisis between the European powers themselves. The British Chancellor of the Exchequer, David Lloyd George, warned Germany in his Mansion House speech of July 22 that Britain would stand by France, provoking a strident German press campaign against him. The Pan German League and, more significantly, the Chief of the German General Staff, Count Hellmuth von Moltke, were happy to contemplate war, but the Kaiser and Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg were not. Nor were France's political leaders, who were advised by their military commander, General Joffre, that a war with Germany offered less than a 70 percent chance of success. In November 1911, therefore, Berlin accepted French and Spanish control of Morocco (formalized in 1912), but received in return 100,000 square miles of the French Congo, adjoining the existing German colony of Kamerun.

At first sight the Moroccan crises intimated a gathering storm in European diplomacy, for their eventual resolution had been reached at the price of deteriorating international relations, of aroused public opinion in France, Britain and Germany, and of an ongoing French mistrust over the unpredictability of German foreign policy. However, the French ambassador to Berlin, Jules Cambon, while personally offended by the precipitate nature of the *Panthersprung*, as the dispatch of the wooden-hulled *Panther* was colorfully dubbed, nonetheless enjoyed excellent personal relations with Kiderlen-Wächter which, ironically, had been forged during the resolution of the first Moroccan crisis. Now, as Cambon and Kiderlen turned their attention to the second confrontation, it quickly became clear that the German government had no territorial ambitions in Morocco and that it was prepared to accept a slice of the French Congo in lieu of gains in North Africa. Cambon was acting on instructions from his Prime Minister, Joseph Caillaux, who had proposed "a general discussion in order to eliminate the greatest possible number of difficulties that currently divide us and Germany on various parts of the globe."⁵⁰ The resulting deal, which confirmed French preeminence in Morocco and the extension of German territory in central Africa without war, indicated that Berlin and Paris had indeed resolved peacefully the most pressing issues that divided them well before the crisis of July 1914. Cambon and Kiderlen-Wächter evidently believed as much, exchanging inscribed personal photographs after the dust had settled, on which Kiderlen had inscribed: "Au terrible adversaire et charmant ami," provoking Cambon to respond with added finesse: "Au charmant adversaire et terrible ami."⁵¹

The ensuing pattern of developments in Africa lent substance to this spirit of guarded optimism. The transfer of the northeastern French Congo to German Kamerun affected many French trading companies, which now found their operations divided by the new frontier. However, an elegant compromise was reached in September 1912, by which firms retained their (French) integrity, but established a

German-registered subsidiary to accommodate the new political circumstances. Further mutual trading companies were created and the joint construction of a central African railway was mooted as France afforded Germany further opportunities for colonial development without the need for war. Both countries also discussed the future of central Africa individually with Britain, believing that there were clearly ample resources and wealth in the region to go around. Berlin had willingly resolved outstanding differences with France, but regarded the Anglo-German talks more positively, even hoping they would lead to a general rapprochement with London. There were some grounds for hope for, as the British Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey, commented in 1911, it did not “matter very much whether we ha[d] Germany or France as a neighbour in Africa,” declaring himself keen to partition the Portuguese empire “in a pro-German spirit.”⁵² The other potential loser in this economic and civilizatory project (as it was perceived) was little Belgium, whose vast colonial territories in the Congo basin constituted an inconvenient obstacle to the full realization of Franco-German and German-British ambitions.

Private and quasi-official financial and commercial cooperation developed between the great imperial powers beyond Africa. Even in the Balkans, where foreign policy rivalry restricted international financial collaboration, private Franco-German initiatives raised loans for various governments, including that of Serbia. In China an international consortium of the major European powers, Japan and the USA emerged following the 1911–12 Revolution, despite France’s problems in reconciling close financial cooperation with Germany in the Far East with its political obligations to its alliance partner Russia. The community of European financial interests was particularly pronounced in the Ottoman Empire, whose public debt was administered by a consortium of Turkish, French, British, German, Italian and Austro-Hungarian representatives. Almost half of the debt itself was in French, and a fifth in German hands. When Russia tried to join the consortium in 1912, France opposed the move, for while Russian involvement might have served to contain German political influence in the Ottoman Empire, Paris regarded the existing, congruent French and German commercial interests as more significant. Similarly, Austrian, German, French and British banks cooperated in administering the Turkish state tobacco monopoly, despite periodic political and military tensions between the Triple Entente and the Triple Alliance.

Public debt aside, the “Berlin to Baghdad” railway came to symbolize Berlin’s ambitions in the Near and Middle East, but in reality German financiers, with much of their money tied up domestically, could not or would not put up the necessary capital to monopolize this vast and complex project. In 1899, for example, the Deutsche Bank had won the concession to build the Anatolian section of the railway from the Ottoman government, but offered the Franco-British Banque Ottomane a 40 percent interest in the project, which was followed in 1903 by Swiss, Italian, and Austrian involvement. France and Germany quarreled briefly during mid-1913 over arrangements for a French-controlled spur running from the main line into Syria, but matters were quickly resolved, for Paris regarded the

accommodation of German interests in Turkey as a means of diverting Berlin's ambitions away from Europe itself. There were striking parallels with the successful Kamerun-Congo negotiations, prompting the French press to interpret the Syrian railway agreement as evidence of a wider improvement in Franco-German relations. In June 1914 a comparable deal was struck between Berlin and London which provided for an extension of the railway from Baghdad to the Gulf port of Basra, under British control. All in all, the Turkish railways project had ultimately served to reconcile the imperial ambitions of Europe's major powers, for Germany had secured a significant outlet for its global political ambitions (*Weltpolitik*), France was assured a major role in Syria, and British interests in the Persian Gulf had been accommodated. When the German military stressed the strategic dimension of the Baghdad railway, the German ambassador to Constantinople countered that its rationale was economic and its function to promote great-power détente.⁵³ Further initiatives during 1914 included the founding of the Constantinople Consortium in June to finance Constantinople's new metro with French, German, Belgian and Swiss participation.

Until 1914, therefore, each European crisis was resolved in turn. Conscious efforts were made both to remove any grounds for confrontation and, more positively, to promote long-term cooperative ventures in their place. Franco-German relations were at their poorest during the Second Moroccan Crisis, but, as with all imperial disputes, were resolved through a combination of territorial demarcation and commercial accommodation. By 1913 Anglo-German relations were similarly on the mend, prompting the *Frankfurter Zeitung* to write in October of "a better understanding between the governing minds in both countries ... [an] end to the sterile years of mutual distrust."⁵⁴ Similarly, on July 23, 1914, Lloyd George was able to welcome the considerable improvement in relations between the two countries, concluding that "the points of cooperation are greater and more numerous and more important than the points of possible controversy."⁵⁵ Yet, leaving aside the wisdom of hindsight, France, Britain, and also Russia were at war with Germany barely a fortnight later.

2.3 Why the War Spread

Photographs show enthusiastic urban crowds cheering their soldiers off to war, but a relatively small proportion of any city's population will make a good show for the cameras. In fact, most city-dwellers were at work or at home, while in the smaller towns and countryside that defined so much of Europe's social landscape mobilization may have proceeded smoothly enough, but also resignedly. Half a million people participated in antiwar demonstrations across Germany, while "stupefaction" and "surprise" typified the response in provincial France, where recorded instances of "weeping" and "desolation" outnumbered "enthusiasm" by

a factor of three to one.⁵⁶ The (French) masses, Richard Cobb observes, accepted "if reluctantly the inevitability of war,"⁵⁷ but of widespread war fever there was little sign. Ordinary Russians, General Brusilov believed, knew and cared even less what the war was about: "Why any German should want to make war on us because of these Serbians, no one could say ... They had never heard of the ambitions of Germany; they did not even know that such a country existed."⁵⁸ None of this impeded the process of mobilization which, in Britain's case, saw the eventual recruitment of a volunteer army 2.5 million strong, but ultimately Europe's leaders had made their decisions for war without troubling to consult their people, and had thereafter sought their retrospective approval at best.

As if in anticipation of the carnage to come, accusation and counteraccusation flew almost immediately over "war guilt." Each power published sets of selected diplomatic documents during the opening months of the war, designed to vindicate its own conduct and condemn the enemy's. Not surprisingly, this dialogue of the deaf intensified further after the war, for the victors based important elements of the peace settlement on the assertion of German responsibility, while the Germans themselves strove to dispute this verdict and thereby undermine the legitimacy of the imposed peace settlement. We shall return to this interwar debate in due course, for its evolution helped among other things to create the moral basis for the appeasement during the 1930s of Hitler's government, but more recent research has done much to explain the genesis of the catastrophe of 1914. In this regard the contours of German foreign policy in the decades before 1914, and Germany's particular role during the July crisis are usually regarded as critical.

The German Empire was proclaimed in January 1871, ending centuries of acute political fragmentation in central Europe that had left the German-speaking lands prey to repeated foreign invasion and to French encroachment on their western frontier. German unification, driven by the Prussian Minister President, Otto von Bismarck, had come at an astonishingly small price, through relatively brief wars in which Prussian (and wider German) casualties were modest by earlier and later standards. The third and final war, sought by both sides, saw Germany triumph over France and impose a punitive peace on the defeated power, which included the enforced return of Alsace and northeastern Lorraine (the Moselle) to German rule. The unbridled joy of the liberal historian Heinrich von Sybel typified the mood in Germany as he wrote to his colleague Hermann Baumgarten in January 1871: "How have we so earned God's grace, enabling us to experience such great and powerful events? ... The substance of every hope and effort of the past twenty years has now been realized in such an immortally marvelous way!"⁵⁹ However, Bismarck for one realized that any potential reckoning may have been delayed, but not necessarily averted. Observers such as Benjamin Disraeli appreciated that a powerful Germany threatened to destabilize the continent, and fears of this sort demanded that Berlin reassure its various neighbors and neutralize potential French revanchism through a particularly skillful and circumspect foreign policy.