Chapter 1
Europe in 1914

Since the Great War of 1914–18 was fought on all the oceans of the world and ultimately involved belligerents from every continent, it can justifiably be termed a 'world war'. But it was certainly not the first. European powers had been fighting each other all over the globe for the previous 300 years. Those who fought in it called it simply 'the Great War'. Like all its predecessors, it began as a purely European conflict, arising out of the conflicting ambitions and mutual fears of the European powers. That its course should have been so terrible, and its consequences so catastrophic, was the result not so much of its global scale as of a combination of military technology and the culture of the peoples who fought it. Karl von Clausewitz had written in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars that war was a trinity composed of the policy of the government, the activities of the military, and 'the passions of the peoples'. Each of these must be taken into account if we are to understand both why the war happened and why it took the course that it did.

The European Powers in 1914

With a few marginal changes, the 'Great Powers' of Europe (as they were still called) were much the same as they had been for the previous two centuries, but the balance between them had changed radically. The most powerful of all was now the German Empire,

created by the Kingdom of Prussia as a result of its victorious wars of 1866 against the Austrian Empire and 1870 against France. France had been reduced by her defeat to second-rank status and resented it. The polyglot lands of the Austrian Empire had been reorganized since 1867 as the Dual Monarchy of Austria-Hungary, and accepted subordinate status as an ally of Germany. Although Hungary was a quasi-autonomous state, the Monarchy was often referred to simply as 'Austria' and its peoples as 'Austrians', much as the United Kingdom was commonly known abroad as 'England' and its people 'English'. Flanking these continental powers were two empires only partially European in their interests: the huge semi-Asiatic Russian Empire, a major if intermittent player in south-east Europe; and Britain, whose main concern was to maintain a balance of power on the Continent while she expanded and consolidated her possessions overseas. Spain, the last vestiges of whose overseas empire (apart from a coastal fringe of North Africa) had been lost to the United States at the beginning of the century, had dwindled to third rank. Her place in the cast had been taken by an Italy whose unification under the House of Savoy between 1860 and 1871 had been more apparent than real, but whose nuisance value alone won her the wary respect of the other powers.

Until the end of the eighteenth century, these powers had been socially homogeneous. All were still primarily agrarian societies dominated by a landed aristocracy and ruled by historic dynasties legitimized by an established Church. A hundred years later all this had either been completely transformed or was in the course of rapid and destabilizing transformation; but the pace of change had been very uneven, as we shall see.

Britain

Britain had led the way. By the beginning of the twentieth century she was already a fully urbanized and industrialized nation. The landed aristocracy remained socially dominant, but the last vestiges

of political power were being wrested from it by a House of Commons in which the two major parties competed for the votes, not just of the middle, but increasingly, as the franchise was extended, of the working classes. A liberal–radical coalition came to power in 1906 and began to lay the foundations of a welfare state, but it could not ignore the paradoxical predicament in which Britain found herself at the beginning of the century. She was still the wealthiest power in the world and the proud owner of the greatest empire that the world had ever seen; but she was more vulnerable than ever before in her history. At the hub of that empire was a densely populated island dependent on world trade for its wealth and, yet more important, for imported foodstuffs to feed its cities. The Royal Navy's 'command of the seas' both held the Empire together and ensured that the British people were fed. Loss of naval supremacy was a nightmare that dogged successive British governments and dominated their relations with other powers. Ideally they would have wished to remain aloof from European disputes, but any indication that their neighbours were showing signs, singly or collectively, of threatening their naval dominance had for the previous twenty years been a matter of anguished national concern.

France

For over a century, between 1689 and 1815, Britain's major rival for world power had been France, and it had taken nearly another 100 years for her to realize that this was no longer the case. France had lagged far behind in the economic development that could have made her a serious competitor. The Revolution of 1789 had destroyed the three pillars of the *Ancien Régime* – monarchy, noblesse, and Church – and distributed their lands among peasant smallholders who remained staunchly resistant to any development, whether reaction or further revolution, that threatened to expropriate them; and their pattern of life did not encourage either the growth of population or the accumulation of capital that made economic development possible. In 1801 the

population of France had totalled twenty-seven million and was the largest in Europe. In 1910 it was still only thirty-five million, whereas over the same period that of Britain had risen from eleven million to forty million, while that of the newly united Germany was over sixty-five million and still rising. After its demoralizing defeat in 1870, the French army had found an outlet in African conquests that created friction with Britain's imperial interests, as did traditional rivalries in the eastern Mediterranean, but for the French people these were marginal issues. They remained deeply divided between those who had profited from the Revolution; those who, under the leadership of the Catholic Church, still refused to come to terms with it; and an increasingly powerful socialist movement that wanted to push it a stage further. France remained both wealthy and culturally dominant, but her domestic politics were highly volatile. Abroad, the German annexation of Alsace and Lorraine in 1871 had been neither forgotten nor forgiven, and fear of German power made France anxiously dependent upon her only major ally – Russia.

Russia

The other continental rival feared by Britain in the nineteenth century was the huge Russian Empire, whose expansion to the south and east threatened both the route to India through the Middle East (which had led Britain to prop up the moribund Turkish Empire) and the frontiers of India itself. Certainly Russia's potential was (as it remains) enormous, but it was limited (as it still is) by the backwardness of its society and the inefficiency of its government.

Capitalism and industrialization came late to Russia, and then largely as a result of foreign investment and expertise. At the beginning of the twentieth century the Czars ruled over a population of 164 million, consisting overwhelmingly of peasants who had been emancipated from actual serfdom only a generation earlier. They still exercised an absolutism such as Western Europe

had never known – supported by an Orthodox Church untouched by any Reformation, and through the instrumentality of a vast and lethargic bureaucracy. The educated elites were divided between 'Westerners', who, looking to Europe as a model, were attempting to introduce economic development and responsible government, and 'Slavophiles', who considered such ideas degenerate and wished to preserve historic Slav culture. But successive military defeats – at the hands of the French and British in 1855–6 and the Japanese in 1904–5 – drove home the lesson learned by Peter the Great, that military power abroad depended on both political and economic development at home. Serfdom had been abolished after the Crimean War, and representative institutions of a kind introduced after defeat and near-revolution in 1905. Railway development had enormously boosted industrial production in the 1890s, bringing Russia, in the view of some economists, to the point of economic 'take-off'. But the regime remained terrified that industrial development, however essential it might be for military effectiveness, would only encourage demands for further political reform, and it suppressed dissidents with a brutality that only drove them to extremes of 'terrorism' (a term and technique invented by Russian revolutionaries in the nineteenth century), thus justifying further brutality. This made her an embarrassing, even if a necessary, ally for the liberal West.

At the end of the nineteenth century the attention of the Russian government had been focused on expansion into Asia, but after defeat by the Japanese in 1904–5 it was switched to south-east Europe, which was still dominated by the Ottoman Empire. There national resistance movements, originally based on the Orthodox Christian communities in Greece, Serbia, and Bulgaria, had traditionally looked to the Russians for sponsorship – first as fellow-Christians, then as fellow-Slavs. All three had established independent states in the course of the nineteenth century. But there were also large numbers of Slavs, especially of Serbs and their cousins the Croats, in Austria-Hungary; and the more successful the new Slav nations were in establishing their identity and

independence, the more apprehensive the Habsburgs became about the increasing restiveness of their own minorities, and the part played by Russia in encouraging it.

Austria-Hungary

In Western Europe – Britain, France, Germany, Italy, even Russia – nationalism was a cohesive force, though such 'submerged nations' as the Poles and the Irish were already struggling for independence. But the Habsburg Monarchy consisted entirely of 'submerged nations'. In the eighteenth century there had been a dominant German elite, but even for the Germans there was now an adjacent homeland in the new German Empire to the north. In 1867 the Habsburg Empire had transformed itself into the 'Dual Monarchy' by granting the most powerful submerged nation, the Magyars, quasi-independence in the Kingdom of Hungary, which shared with the dominantly German 'Austrians' only a monarch (the Emperor Franz-Joseph, who had ruled since 1848), an army, a treasury, and a foreign office. The Magyars, like the Germans (and indeed the British, whom they greatly admired and whose parliament building they imitated in Budapest), considered themselves a master race, and they ruled oppressively over their own Slav minorities – Slovaks, Rumanians, and Croats. In the western half of the Monarchy the German 'Austrians' ruled not only Slavs to the north (Czechs), north-east (Poles and Ruthenes), and south (Slovenes and Serbs), but Italian-speaking lands on the southern slopes of the Alps (together with the German-speaking South Tyrol) coveted by the new Kingdom of Italy. Unlike the tough Magyar squireens of Budapest, the rational bureaucrats of Vienna tried to treat their subject-nationalities tolerantly and granted them equal rights with the Germans. The result was to paralyse the machinery of government in Vienna and force the Emperor to rule by decree. Its rich mixture of cultures certainly made Vienna a city with a uniquely vibrant intellectual and artistic life, but its intelligentsia looked to the future with apprehension and occasionally despair.

Germany

Finally there was Imperial Germany, the most complex and problematic power of them all.

The unification of Germany in 1871 had created a nation that combined the most dynamic economy in Europe with a regime that in many respects had hardly emerged from feudalism. The Hohenzollern dynasty had ruled Prussia through a bureaucracy and an army that were both drawn from a 'service gentry' (*Junkers*) rooted primarily in their eastern provinces. They resented the very existence of a *Reichstag* (parliament) that had been unsuccessfully aspiring to power ever since the middle of the nineteenth century. In the newly united empire the *Reichstag* represented the whole range of the enlarged German population: agrarian conservatives with their vast estates in the east, industrialists in the north and west, Bavarian Roman Catholic farmers in the south, and, increasingly as the economy developed, the industrial working classes, with their socialist leaders, in the valleys of the Rhine and the Ruhr. The *Reichstag* voted the budget, but the government was appointed by, and was responsible to, the monarch, the Kaiser. The chief intermediary between *Reichstag* and Kaiser was the Chancellor. The first holder of that office, Otto von Bismarck, had used the authority he derived from the Kaiser to make the *Reichstag* do his own bidding. His successors were little more than messengers informing the *Reichstag* of the Kaiser's decisions and manipulating them to ensure the passage of the budget. By the Kaiser himself they were seen almost as household servants, of considerably less importance than the Chief of the General Staff.

Under these circumstances the personality of the Kaiser was of overwhelming importance, and it was the misfortune not only of Germany but of the entire world that at this juncture the House of Hohenzollern should have produced, in Wilhelm II, an individual who in his person embodied three qualities that can be said to have

1. Kaiser Wilhelm II: the incarnation of 'Prussian militarism'

characterized the contemporary German ruling elite: archaic militarism, vaulting ambition, and neurotic insecurity.

Militarism was institutionalized in the dominant role that the army had played in the culture of the old Prussia it had dominated and had to a large extent created; much as its victories over Austria and France had created the new German Empire. In the new Germany the army was socially dominant, as it had been in the old Prussia – a dominance spread throughout all classes by three-year universal military service. The bourgeoisie won the cherished right to wear uniform by taking up commissions in the reserve, and imitated the habits of the *Junker* military elite. At a lower level, retired NCOs dominated their local communities. The Kaiser appeared always in uniform as the All Highest War Lord, surrounded by a military entourage. Abroad, this militarism, with its constant parades and uniforms and celebrations of the victories of 1870, was seen as absurd rather than sinister; and so it might have been if it had not been linked with the second quality – ambition.

Bismarck himself, having created the German Empire, had been content simply to preserve it, but the successor generation was not so easily satisfied. It had every reason to be ambitious. It constituted a nation over sixty million strong with a superb heritage of music, poetry, and philosophy, and whose scientists, technologists, and scholars (not to mention soldiers) were the envy of the world. Its industrialists had already surpassed the British in the production of coal and steel, and together with the scientists were pioneering a new 'industrial revolution' based on chemicals and electricity. The Germans prided themselves on a uniquely superior culture that held the balance between the despotic barbarism of their eastern neighbours and the decadent democracy of the West. But within this proud, prosperous, and successful nation a deep cleavage was developing, which only grew deeper as its prosperity increased. The growth of its industries increased the size and influence of a working class whose leaders, while no longer revolutionary, were increasingly pressing for an extension of democracy and the

abolition of social privilege, and whose party, the Social Democrats, had become by 1914 the largest in the *Reichstag*.

The possessing classes had their own quarrels, mainly between the landowners of the east and the industrialists of the west, but they made common cause against what they saw as a socialist revolutionary threat. From the beginning of the twentieth century they began to combat it by a 'forward policy' based on the assertion of 'national greatness'. With the Kaiser at their head, German right-wing political leaders began to claim for Germany the status, not only of a Great Power, but of a World Power, *Weltmacht*. The only competitor in that class was the British Empire; but if she was to compete with Britain Germany needed not only a great army, but a great fleet. To raise money for such a fleet a major propaganda exercise was necessary; and that propaganda could be effective only if Britain was depicted as the next great adversary that the Germans must overcome if they were to achieve the status that they believed to be rightfully their due.

The Rival Alliances

Germany already saw herself surrounded by enemies. When Bismarck created the German Empire in 1871, he knew very well that the natural reaction of her neighbours would be to unite against her, and he took care to see that this did not happen. France, with good reason, he regarded as irreconcilable, if only because she had been compelled to surrender her provinces of Alsace and Lorraine. He therefore tried to neutralize her by encouraging the colonial ambitions that would bring her into conflict with Britain, and ensured that she could find no allies among the other powers of Europe by binding them all into his own system of alliances. The Dual Monarchy presented no difficulty. Beset with internal problems, she had been happy to conclude the Dual Alliance with Germany in 1879. Her own natural enemy was the newly unified Italy, who coveted the Italian-speaking lands on the southern slopes of the Alps and at the head of the Adriatic that still remained in

Austrian hands; but Bismarck linked both into a Triple Alliance by supporting Italian territorial claims against France and her Mediterranean possessions.

There remained the two flanking powers, Russia and Britain. Russia would be a formidable ally for the French if given the chance, which Bismarck was determined that she should not have. He had been careful to cultivate her friendship and had linked her into his 'system' by an alliance concluded in 1881 and renewed, as a 'Reinsurance Treaty', six years later. As for Britain, France and Russia were her natural adversaries, so to have them held in check by a strong central power suited British statesmen very well. The one thing that Bismarck had good reason to fear was a war in the Balkans between Austria and Russia that might upset the balance that he had so precariously established. At the Congress of Berlin in 1878 he brokered an agreement that divided the Balkans into spheres of influence between Russia and the Dual Monarchy, and gave to the latter a 'Protectorate' over the most northerly and turbulent of the Ottoman provinces, Bosnia-Herzegovina. This settlement produced an uneasy peace that lasted until the end of the century, but Bismarck's 'system' had begun to unravel long before then.

Bismarck's successors, for a whole complex of reasons, failed to renew the treaty with Russia, thus leaving her available as an ally for France. It was a terrible mistake. For Russia, if this newly powerful Germany was not an ally she was a threat, and one that could be countered only by a military alliance with France. France was in any case a plentiful source of the investment capital that Russia needed to finance the modernization of her economy. So in 1891 the two powers concluded a treaty, the Dual Entente, to confront the Triple Alliance, and the rival groups began to compete in the enhancement of their military power.

The British initially regarded this alliance between her traditional adversaries with alarm, and the dynamics of international relations

would normally have dictated an alliance with Germany as a natural consequence. That this did not happen was due partly to the traditional British reluctance to become involved in any entangling continental alliances, and partly to extraordinarily clumsy German diplomacy. More important than either, however, was the German decision that we have already noted, to build a navy that could challenge the British command of the seas.

Given that she already had the most powerful army in the world, it was not immediately evident – at least not to the British – why Germany needed an ocean-going navy at all. Hitherto, in spite of industrial competition, British relations with Germany had been friendly rather than otherwise. But now there began a 'naval race', for quantitative and qualitative superiority in ships, that was to transform British public opinion. By 1914 Britain had pulled decisively ahead, if only because she was prepared to devote greater resources to shipbuilding and did not need, as did the Germans, to sustain the burden of an arms race by land as well. But the British remained concerned not so much with the fleet that Germany had already built as with that which she yet might – especially if a successful war gave her military hegemony over the Continent.

So Britain mended her fences with her traditional rivals. In 1904 she settled her differences with France in Africa, establishing a relationship that became known as *l'entente cordiale*. There remained the Russian Empire, whose southward expansion towards the frontiers of India had given Victorian statesmen continual nightmares, and had led the British in 1902 to conclude their first formal alliance for a nearly a century with the emerging power of Japan. Three years later Russia was defeated and brought to the verge of revolution by war with Japan, so in 1907 she was happy to conclude an agreement with Britain over the disputed borderlands of Persia and Afghanistan, thus creating a 'Triple Entente'. Beyond Europe, Britain took care to remain on friendly terms with the United States. American appetite for naval expansion had been whetted by victory over Spain in 1899 and

annexation of her possessions in the Pacific, but British statesmen realized that America's immense resources meant that confrontation with her should be avoided at almost any cost. So traditional rivalries were appeased by the virtual abandonment of a British naval presence in the western hemisphere and the careful cultivation of a harmony between British and American elites based on 'Anglo-Saxon' consanguinity and shared political values.

Although Britain concluded no formal alliances except that with Japan, the Germans complained that the British were weaving a web to encircle and imprison them, and relations grew steadily worse. In 1911, when the Germans attempted to humiliate the French by challenging their influence in Morocco with a naval demonstration off Agadir, the British made their support for the French explicit. Many people in Britain and Germany began to regard each other as natural enemies, and war between them as inevitable.

But, when war did break out three years later, it was at the other end of Europe, in the Balkans, as Bismarck himself had gloomily foreseen.

The Balkan Crises

Without Bismarck's calming hand, relations between Austria-Hungary and Russia deteriorated as badly as those between Britain and Germany. The Balkan state that the Austrians most feared was Serbia, especially since their protectorate over Bosnia-Herzegovina had placed many Serbs under Austrian control. In 1903 a *coup d'état* in Belgrade had overthrown the Obrenovic dynasty that had pursued a course of conciliation towards the Dual Monarchy, and replaced it with a regime dedicated to the expansion of Serbia through the liberation of Serbs under foreign rule – especially those in Bosnia. Five years later Austria formally annexed Bosnia-Herzegovina to facilitate her control over those provinces. The Serb government responded by creating an open 'liberation

movement' for Bosnian Serbs with a covert terrorist wing, 'the Black Hand', trained and supported by elements within the Serb army. At the same time, Serbia, with Russian encouragement, took the lead in forming a 'Balkan League' with Greece, Bulgaria, and Montenegro, dedicated to the final expulsion of the Turks from the peninsula. Their opportunity came in 1912, when the Turks were engaged in defending their territories in Libya against an attack by Italy, whose government had grandiose ambitions (anticipating those of Mussolini a generation later) to restore the glories of the Roman Empire. In the First Balkan War of that year the Balkan allies drove the Turks from the entire peninsula except a bridgehead round Adrianople. A second war was fought the following year between the victorious allies over the division of the spoils.

As a result of these two wars, the territory and population of Serbia were doubled and her ambitions hugely encouraged. But in Vienna the reigning emotions were fear and frustration: fear at the apparently unstoppable march of Serbia, with all the encouragement this gave to Slav dissidents in both halves of the Monarchy; and frustration at their inability to do anything about it. Then on 28 July 1914 the heir to the Habsburg throne, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, was assassinated in Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia-Herzegovina, by Gavril Princip, a teenage terrorist trained and armed by the Serb-sponsored Black Hand.