Chapter 2
The Coming of War

The Crisis of 1914

The crisis precipitated by the Archduke's assassination at first seemed no worse than the half-dozen or so that had preceded it in the Balkans since 1908 and been peacefully resolved by the intervention of the Great Powers. But the Austrians were now determined to crush their Serbian enemy for good. They issued an ultimatum that would, if accepted, have turned Serbia virtually into a client state of the Dual Monarchy. This the Russians could not have tolerated, and the Austrians knew it; so before issuing their ultimatum they obtained what became known as 'a blank cheque' from Berlin, assuring them of German support in the event of war. In issuing that cheque the German government knew that it was risking at least a European war, but by now such a war was regarded in Berlin as almost inevitable. Germany's military leaders calculated that it would be better to have it sooner, while the Russians had still not fully recovered from the defeat of 1905, rather than three years later, when they would have completed a huge French-financed railway-building and mobilization programme that could put them in an entirely new league of military strength. France herself had been going through a phase of militant nationalism after the Agadir crisis, and was both militarily and psychologically ready for war. In Russia, Pan-Slav public opinion pressed strongly for war, even though the government knew very well the weakness not only of the

army but of the entire regime, already shaken in 1905 by a revolution whose rumblings had not yet died away. As for the British, their interest in the affairs of the Balkans was minimal and their own domestic problems overwhelming; but if there was to be a European war, they were unlikely to stand by and watch France defeated by a Germany, many of whose publicists had for long been designating England as their principal enemy and for whom victory in Europe would be only the preliminary to her establishment as not just a Great, but a World Power.

Europe thus stood on the brink of war in July 1914. To understand why she toppled over we must now look at the other two elements in the Clausewitzian trinity: the activities of the military and the passions of the peoples.

The Military Situation in 1914

The German victories of 1866–70 had opened a new chapter in the military as well as the political history of Europe. The German triumphs were generally seen to have been due to two factors, one strategic and one tactical. The first had been Germany's capacity to deploy very much larger forces in the field than could her adversaries, and this was itself due to two causes. One was the development of railways and telegraphs, which made possible the rapid deployment to the theatre of war of unprecedented numbers of men. The other was the introduction of universal peacetime conscription, which ensured not only that these numbers were available but that they had been fully trained and could be rapidly mobilized when required. Such armies – and by 1871 that of the Germans already numbered over a million – required an unprecedented degree of organization, which was the task of a general staff whose head became the effective commander-in-chief of the entire force. It also called for a devolution of command that imposed new responsibilities on middle-ranking and junior officers. Battles could no longer be fought and decided under the eye of a

single commanding general. They might extend, as they did in the Russo-Japanese War, over many scores of miles. Once he had deployed his forces on the battlefield, the commander-in-chief could only sit in his headquarters many miles behind the front line and hope for the best.

This extension of the front was increased by the second factor, the development of long-range weapons. The introduction of breech-loading and rifled firearms for infantry increased both range and accuracy to an extent that would have made frontal attacks out of the question if simultaneous developments in artillery had not provided the firepower to support them. Even since 1870 ranges had increased enormously. By 1900 all European armies were equipped with infantry rifles sighted up to 1,000 yards and lethally accurate at half that range. Field guns were now ranged up to five miles, and capable of firing up to twenty rounds a minute. Heavy artillery, hitherto used only for siege work, was being rendered mobile by rail and road, and could engage targets at a range of over twenty-five miles. Armies would thus come under fire long before they could even see their enemy, let alone attack his positions.

In a pioneer work of operational analysis, *La guerre future*, published in 1899, the Polish writer Ivan Bloch calculated that in wars fought with such weapons the offensive would in future be impossible. Battles would quickly degenerate into bloody deadlock. The cost of maintaining such huge armies in the field would be prohibitive. The economies of the belligerent powers would be overstrained, and the consequent hardships imposed on the civilian population would everywhere lead to the revolutions that the possessing classes throughout Europe were beginning to dread. So accurately did this foretell the course and outcome of the First World War that subsequent historians have wondered why more account of it was not taken at the time. But within a few years of its publication two wars were fought that showed that, although the new weapons certainly inflicted terrible losses, decisive battles

could still be fought and won. In South Africa in 1899–1902, in spite of the skill and courage of the Boer riflemen, the British eventually won the war and pacified the country – very largely through the use of cavalry whose demise military reformers had been foreseeing for many years. More significantly, in 1904–5, in a war fought on both sides with the latest modern weapons, the Japanese had been able, by a combination of skilful infantry and artillery tactics and the suicidal courage of their troops, to defeat the Russians in battle after battle and compel them to sue for peace. The lesson learned by European armies was that victory was still possible for armies equipped with up-to-date weapons and whose soldiers were not afraid to die. But a further lesson was that the victory had to be quick. A campaign lasting little more than a year had resulted in revolution in Russia and brought Japan to the brink of economic collapse. Bloch's forecast that no nation could for long sustain a war fought, in the words of the German Chief of Staff Alfred von Schlieffen, by 'armies of millions of men costing milliards of marks', was taken to heart. The powers of Europe all prepared to fight a short war because they could not realistically contemplate fighting a long one; and the only way to keep the war short was by taking the offensive.

The 'Arms Race'

In the first decade of the twentieth century the powers of Europe were engaged in a process of competitive modernization of their armed forces that came to be called, rather inaccurately, an 'arms race'. The lessons of the Russo-Japanese War were closely studied, especially by the Germans, who perceived long before their competitors the importance of entrenchments to protect their infantry from artillery fire, and the huge advantage given by mobile heavy artillery. Machine guns had also proved their value, but their rate of fire of 600 rounds per minute presented problems of ammunition supply that made their employment in mobile warfare highly problematic. All armies added them to their arsenals, but it was only in the defensive battles on the Western Front in 1915–17

that they came into their own. All armies abandoned their colourful uniforms (the British, accustomed to fighting in the dust and desert of colonial campaigns, had done so already) and clothed themselves in various shades of the mud in which they would now have to fight – except the French, who were compelled to retain their distinctive scarlet trousers by nostalgic nationalist politicians, and suffered terribly in consequence. All competed in introducing the new technology of the aeroplane and the automobile, although in 1914 the first was only just coming into use to supplement cavalry reconnaissance, and the second was used mainly for the transportation of staff officers and senior commanders. Throughout the war, transportation and traction beyond railheads were to remain overwhelmingly horse drawn. Once they left their trains, armies could still move no faster than those of Napoleon – indeed, of Julius Caesar. Finally, the importance of wireless communications – and their interception – was generally recognized, especially in naval warfare. But on land sets were still too heavy for operational use below army headquarters, with results for front-line fighting that we shall consider in due course.

In armament all European armies in 1914 were at least comparable. Only in their use of mobile heavy artillery were the Germans able to spring unpleasant surprises. What gave military planners sleepless nights was not the equipment of the enemy armed forces, but their size. This was ultimately determined by the size of the population, but it was also affected by social constraints that limited the extent and duration of conscription, and financial pressures limiting its cost. Of the three powers principally concerned, the population of the newly united German Empire at sixty-seven million exceeded, as we have seen, that of France at thirty-six million, but was far inferior to the 164 million of the Russian Empire. In France, democratic mistrust of militarism had confined military service to two years, but over 80 per cent of available manpower was called up. In Germany military service lasted for three years, but the numbers called up were constrained by both budgetary

considerations and resistance from an increasingly left-wing *Reichstag*, as well as by reluctance within the army itself to recruiting within the growing and (it was thought) politically unreliable urban population. Only some 54 per cent of the manpower available was called up before 1911, which gave the German army a peacetime strength of 612,000 as against the French of 593,000. The size of Russia's population and in consequence of her army (1,345,000) looked terrifying on paper, but it was made less impressive by shortage of railways to deploy it and the administrative incompetence so humiliatingly revealed by the defeat in 1905. So negligible had the Russian threat then appeared that Schlieffen, in the 'plan' he bequeathed in that year to his successor, virtually ignored it altogether and concentrated the entire strength of the German army against France.

The Russian defeat in 1905 may have reassured the Germans, but it terrified the French. After 1908 they began to pour money into Russia to build up her economic infrastructure (in particular her railways) and re-equip her armies in a 'Great Programme' of military reform that was due for completion in 1917. It was now the Germans' turn to be alarmed. They could no longer underrate the importance of Austria-Hungary as an ally, and there was much wild talk in both countries about the Slav threat to Western civilization. The constraints on the Germans' own military build-up disappeared, and in 1912 they introduced a crash programme of expansion that increased the size of their army by 1914 to 864,000. The French responded by increasing their own length of military service to three years, giving them a peacetime strength of 700,000. In both countries the additional expenditure was rushed through parliaments increasingly convinced of the imminence of a war in which their national existence would be at stake. When war did break out in 1914 the Germans and French each mobilized about four million men, of which some 1.7 million Germans and two million French confronted each other on the Western Front.

The Decision for War

Such was the situation when the Austrians delivered their ultimatum to Serbia in July 1914. The Austrians were determined to crush the Serbs, if necessary by using military force, and relied on their German ally to hold the Russians in check while they did so. The Germans were confident that they could deter Russia from intervening, but even if they did not, they preferred to go to war while their army was at the peak of its strength, rather than delay while the balance of military power tipped inexorably in favour of their adversaries. The one thing they did not contemplate was letting the Austrians down. The Dual Monarchy was their only remaining ally (quite rightly they discounted the Italians), and its humiliation and likely disintegration would be catastrophic for German prestige and power. But very similar calculations were being made in Russia. For the Russians, to abandon Serbia would be to betray the whole Slav cause and lose everything that had been gained in the Balkans since the beginning of the century. Finally, for the French, to abandon Russia to defeat would be peacefully to acquiesce in a German hegemony of Europe and her own reduction to the rank of a third-rate power.

All this was quite clear in Berlin. By supporting the Austrians the Germans knew that they were risking a European war, but one that they expected to win. The only question was, would it also be a world war? Would Britain be brought in as well?

This was a possibility whose implications had been barely considered in Berlin, where decision-makers were in a state of what psychologists have termed 'cognitive dissonance'. Britain was widely seen as Germany's ultimate enemy, the adversary who must be faced down if Germany were to attain her rightful status as a World Power. Yet Britain had been virtually ignored in German military planning. The army had left it to the navy, assuming that any expeditionary force Britain sent to help the French would be too small to worry about. But the German navy could do nothing – or

believed it could do nothing – until it built up a high seas fleet capable of challenging the Royal Navy, which it was not yet in a position to do. For Germany's Minister for the Navy, Admiral Graf von Tirpitz, the timing of the war was disastrous. Any British expeditionary force on the Continent might be caught up in the defeat of its allies, but that had happened before (as it was to happen again) in European history; but the war could still have gone on as it had in the days of Napoleon – a prolonged war of the kind for which no one had planned and which it was generally believed that no one could win.

The German government was thus gambling on British neutrality, and in July 1914 this seemed a reasonable bet. Since 1906 the hands of the British government had been full with industrial unrest at home and an apparently imminent civil war in Ireland. Ever since the Agadir crisis in 1911 British military leaders had been holding informal but detailed staff discussions with their French colleagues about the possible dispatch of an expeditionary force to the Continent, but the government had not thought it wise to reveal these to a largely pacifistic parliament. The Royal Navy had made all its dispositions on the assumption of a war with Germany, but was committed to nothing. There was widespread concern at the thrust of German policy, but left-wing and liberal opinion remained solidly neutralist. Dislike of German 'militarism' was balanced by hostility to a despotic Russian regime whose pogroms against Jews and brutal persecution of dissidents were equally offensive to the liberal conscience. It was still widely believed that British imperial interests were threatened more by France and Russia than by Germany. Commercial and financial links with Germany remained close. Public opinion and parliamentary support thus remained too uncertain for the Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey, to be able to give any unequivocal assurance that, if the crisis developed into war, Britain would take her place alongside her associates of the Triple Entente. Had Germany not invaded Belgium, it is an open question whether Britain would have maintained her neutrality and for how long. But invade her she did, and we must see why.

German military planners had faced one basic strategic problem since the days of Frederick the Great. Squeezed between a hostile France in the west and a hostile Russia in the east (usually joined by a hostile Austria in the south), their only hope of avoiding defeat had always been to overwhelm one of their enemies before the other was in a position to intervene. Prussian victories in 1866 and 1870 had been made possible by Bismarck's success in neutralizing Russia in both conflicts, but in 1891 the Franco-Russian Alliance had revived the dilemma in its starkest form. Which enemy should be destroyed first? Schlieffen had firmly settled for France. No decisive victory was possible in the huge plains of Poland, but, if France could be defeated, the Russians might quickly be brought to terms. But how to gain a rapid and decisive victory over France? Since 1871 France had built such formidable fortifications along her German frontier that a repeat of 1870 appeared impossible. The only answer seemed to lie in an outflanking movement through neutral Belgium, one powerful enough to defeat the French army in time to switch forces eastwards to ward off the expected Russian assault. Schlieffen himself, as we have seen, did not take the Russian threat very seriously, but by 1914 it appeared such a menace that German planners sometimes feared that Russian armies might enter Berlin before their own forces had reached Paris. A massive invasion through Belgium was thus an essential part of German war plans, and the increase in the size of the German army resulting from the reforms of 1912–13 had been largely devised to make this possible.

Clausewitz once wrote that military plans might have their own grammar but they had no inherent logic. There was certainly no logic in the decision by the German General Staff that, in order to support the Austrians in a conflict with Russia over Serbia, Germany should attack France, who was not party to the quarrel, and do so by invading Belgium, whose neutral status had been guaranteed by a treaty of 1831 to which both Germany and Britain had been signatories. It was significant of the state of affairs in Berlin that the German Chancellor, Theodore von Bethmann

Hollweg, saw it as his task, not to query this decision, but to justify it as a necessary breach of international law in the prosecution of a just and defensive war. But, in order for the war to appear just and defensive, Russia must be made to appear the aggressor, and this was the major concern of the German government in the last days of the crisis.

Serbia predictably rejected the Austrian ultimatum, and Austria declared war on 28 July. Thereafter military calculations dominated decision-making in every European capital. On 30 July Czar Nicholas II, with extreme hesitation, ordered the mobilization of all Russian armed forces. It was generally assumed that mobilization led inevitably to *Aufmarsch*, the deployment of armies for the invasion of their neighbours, and that such deployment led with equal inevitability to war. Mobilization was thus like drawing a gun; whoever did so first enjoyed a huge strategic advantage. But, if Russia did not do so first, her administrative backwardness and the vast distances her reservists had to travel would put her at an equally huge disadvantage with respect to the more compact and better-organized Germany. In fact, neither for her nor for her French ally did mobilization necessarily mean war, but for Germany mobilization did lead seamlessly into *Aufmarsch*, and *Aufmarsch* into an invasion of Belgium timetabled to the last minute. Russian mobilization gave her the excuse. Last-minute attempts by a panic-stricken Kaiser to delay matters were useless. The order to mobilize was given in Berlin on 1 August. An ultimatum demanding free passage through Belgium was issued the following day, and when it was rejected German troops crossed the frontier on 3 August.

In Britain the invasion of Belgium united what had until then been a deeply divided public opinion. Ever since the sixteenth century it had been an article of faith in British naval policy that the Low Countries should not be allowed to fall into hostile hands, and this belief had become almost visceral, irrespective of party politics. The British government at once issued an ultimatum demanding assurances that Belgian neutrality would be respected. It remained

2. Belgian refugees: the first fruits of the German invasion

unanswered, and Britain declared war on Germany on 4 August. Liberal concerns for the rights of small nations combined with traditional conservative concern for the maintenance of the balance of European power to make parliamentary support almost unanimous. A state of war was proclaimed throughout the British Empire and the 'First World War' began.