Chapter

1 The world in 1914: outbreak of the First World War

1.1 PROLOGUE

Under cover of darkness late on the night of 5 August 1914, five columns of German assault troops, which had entered Belgium two days earlier, were converging on the town of Liège, expecting little resistance. To their surprise they were halted by determined fire from the town's outlying forts. This was a setback for the Germans: control of Liège was essential before they could proceed with their main operation against France. They were forced to resort to siege tactics, using heavy howitzers. These fired shells up into the air and they plunged from a height of 12 000 feet to shatter the armour-plating of the forts. Strong though they were, these Belgian forts were not equipped to withstand such a battering for long; on 13 August the first one surrendered and three days later Liège was under German control. This was the first major engagement of the First World War, that horrifying conflict of monumental proportions which was to mark the beginning of a new era in European and world history.

1.2 THE WORLD IN 1914

(a) Europe still dominated the rest of the world in 1914

Most of the decisions which shaped the fate of the world were taken in the capitals of Europe. Germany was the leading power in Europe both militarily and economically. She had overtaken Britain in the production of pig-iron and steel, though not quite in coal, while France, Belgium, Italy and Austria–Hungary (known as the Habsburg Empire) were well behind. Russian industry was expanding rapidly but had been so backward to begin with that she could not seriously challenge Germany and Britain. But it was outside Europe that the most spectacular industrial progress had been made during the previous 40 years. In 1914 the USA produced more coal, pig-iron and steel than either Germany or Britain and now ranked as a world power. Japan too had modernized rapidly and was a power to be reckoned with after her defeat of Russia in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–5.

(b) The political systems of these world powers varied widely

The USA, Britain and France had *democratic forms of government*. This means that they each had a parliament consisting of representatives elected by the people; these parliaments had an important say in running the country. Some systems were not as democratic as they seemed: Germany had an elected lower house of parliament (Reichstag), but real power lay with the Chancellor (a sort of prime minister) and the Kaiser (emperor). Italy

was a monarchy with an elected parliament, but the franchise (right to vote) was limited to wealthy people. Japan had an elected lower house, but here too the franchise was restricted, and the emperor and the privy council held most of the power. The governments in Russia and Austria–Hungary were very different from the democracy of the West. The Tsar (emperor) of Russia and the Emperor of Austria (who was also King of Hungary) were *autocratic* or *absolute rulers*. This means that although parliaments existed, they could only advise the rulers; if they felt like it, the rulers could ignore the parliaments and do exactly as they wished.

(c) Imperial expansion after 1880

The European powers had taken part in a great burst of imperialist expansion in the years after 1880. *Imperialism* is the building up of an empire by seizing territory overseas. Most of Africa was taken over by the European states in what became known as the 'the Scramble for Africa'; the idea behind it was mainly to get control of new markets and new sources of raw materials. There was also intervention in the crumbling Chinese Empire; the European powers, the USA and Japan all, at different times, forced the helpless Chinese to grant trading concessions. Exasperation with the incompetence of their government caused the Chinese to overthrow the ancient Manchu dynasty and set up a republic (1911).

(d) Europe had divided itself into two alliance systems

The Triple Alliance:	Germany
	Austria–Hungary
	Italy
The Triple Entente:	Britain
	France
	Russia

In addition, Japan and Britain had signed an alliance in 1902. Friction between the two main groups (sometimes called 'the armed camps') had brought Europe to the verge of war several times since 1900 (Map 1.1).

(e) Causes of friction

There were many causes of friction which threatened to upset the peace of Europe:

- There was naval rivalry between Britain and Germany.
- The French resented the loss of Alsace–Lorraine to Germany at the end of the Franco-Prussian War (1871).
- The Germans accused Britain, Russia and France of trying to 'encircle' them; the Germans were also disappointed with the results of their expansionist policies (known as *Weltpolitik* – literally 'world policy'). Although they had taken possession of some islands in the Pacific and some territory in Africa, their empire was small in comparison with those of the other European powers, and not very rewarding economically.

Map 1.1 **Europe in 1914**

Map 1.2 **Peoples of the Habsburg Empire**

- The Russians were suspicious of Austrian ambitions in the Balkans and worried about the growing military and economic strength of Germany.
- Serbian *nationalism* (the desire to free your nation from control by people of another nationality) was probably the most dangerous cause of friction. Since 1882 the Serbian government of King Milan had been pro-Austrian, and his son Alexander, who came of age in 1893, followed the same policy. However, the Serbian nationalists bitterly resented the fact that by the Treaty of Berlin signed in 1878, the Austrians had been allowed to occupy Bosnia, an area which the Serbs thought should be part of a Greater Serbia. The nationalists saw Alexander as a traitor; in 1903 he was murdered by a group of army officers, who put Peter Karageorgević on the throne. The change of regime caused a dramatic switch in Serbian policy: the Serbs now became pro-Russian and made no secret of their ambition to unite all Serbs and Croats into a large South Slav kingdom (Yugoslavia). Many of these Serbs and Croats lived inside the borders of the Habsburg Empire; if they were to break away from Austria–Hungary to become part of a Greater Serbia, it would threaten to break up the entire ramshackle Habsburg Empire, which contained people of many different nationalities (Map 1.2). There were Germans, Hungarians, Magyars, Czechs, Slovaks, Italians, Poles, Romanians, Ruthenians and Slovenes, as well as Serbs and Croats. If the Serbs and Croats left the fold, many of the others would demand their independence as well, and the Hapsburg Empire would break up. Consequently some Austrians were keen for what they called a 'preventive war' to destroy Serbia before she became strong enough to provoke the break-up of their empire. The Austrians also resented Russian support for Serbia.

Arising from all these resentments and tensions came a series of events which culminated in the outbreak of war in late July 1914.

1.3 EVENTS LEADING UP TO THE OUTBREAK OF WAR

Time chart of main events

Europe divides into two armed camps:

1882	Triple Alliance of Germany, Austria–Hungary and Italy
1894	France and Russia sign alliance
1904	Britain and France sign 'Entente Cordiale' (friendly 'getting-together')
1907	Britain and Russia sign agreement.

Other important events:

1897	Admiral Tirpitz's Navy Law – Germany intends to build up fleet
1902	Britain and Japan sign alliance
1904–5	Russo-Japanese War, won by Japan
1905–6	Moroccan Crisis
1906	Britain builds first 'Dreadnought' battleship
1908	Bosnia Crisis
1911	Agadir Crisis
1912	First Balkan War

1913	Second Balkan War	
1914	28 June	Archduke Franz Ferdinand assassinated in Sarajevo
	28 July	Austria–Hungary declares war on Serbia
	29 July	Russia orders general mobilization of troops
	1 August	Germany declares war on Russia
	3 August	Germany declares war on France
	4 August	Britain enters war
	6 August	Austria–Hungary declares war on Russia.

(a) The Moroccan Crisis (1905–6)

This was an attempt by the Germans to expand their empire and to test the recently signed Anglo-French 'Entente Cordiale' (1904), with its understanding that France would recognize Britain's position in Egypt in return for British approval of a possible French takeover of Morocco; this was one of the few remaining areas of Africa not controlled by a European power. The Germans announced that they would assist the Sultan of Morocco to maintain his country's independence, and demanded an international conference to discuss its future. A conference was duly held at Algeciras in southern Spain (January 1906). The British believed that if the Germans had their way, it would lead to virtual German control of Morocco. This would be an important step on the road to German diplomatic domination and it would encourage them to press ahead with their *Weltpolitik*. The British, who had just signed the 'Entente Cordiale' with France, were determined to lead the opposition to Germany at the conference. The Germans did not take the 'Entente' seriously because there was a long history of hostility between Britain and France. But to the amazement of the Germans, Britain, Russia, Italy and Spain supported the French demand to control the Moroccan bank and police. It was a serious diplomatic defeat for the Germans, who realized that the new line-up of Britain and France was a force to be reckoned with, especially as the crisis was soon followed by Anglo-French 'military conversations'.

(b) The British agreement with Russia (1907)

This was regarded by the Germans as another hostile move. In fact it was a logical step, given that in 1894 Russia had signed an alliance with France, Britain's new partner in the 'Entente Cordiale'. For many years the British had viewed Russia as a disgraceful example of corrupt, anti-democratic aristocratic government. Worse still, the Russians were seen as a major threat to British interests in the Far East and India. However, the situation had recently changed. Russia's defeat by Japan in the war of 1904–5 seemed to suggest that the Russians were no longer much of a military threat. The outbreak of revolution in Russia in January 1905 had weakened the country internally. The Russians were keen to end the long-standing rivalry and anxious to attract British investment for their industrial modernization programme. In October 1905, when the tsar granted the Russian people freedom of speech and the right to have an elected parliament, the British began to feel more kindly disposed towards the tsarist system. It made agreement possible and the two governments were able therefore to settle their remaining differences in Persia, Afghanistan and Tibet. It was not a military alliance and not necessarily an anti-German move, but the Germans saw it as confirmation of their fears that Britain, France and Russia were planning to 'encircle' them.

(c) The Bosnia Crisis (1908)

The crisis over Bosnia, a province of Turkey, brought the tension between Austria–Hungary and Serbia to fever pitch. In 1878 the Congress of Berlin had reached the rather confusing decision that Bosnia should remain officially part of Turkey, but that Austria–Hungary should be allowed to administer it. In 1908 there was a new government in Turkey, dominated by a group of army officers (known as Young Turks), who resented the Austrian presence in Bosnia and were determined to assert Turkish control over the province. This gave the Austrians the chance to get in first: they announced the formal annexation (takeover) of Bosnia. This was a deliberate blow at the neighbouring state of Serbia, which had also been hoping to take Bosnia since it contained about three million Serbs among its mixed population of Serbs, Croats and Muslims. The Serbs appealed for help to their fellow Slavs, the Russians, who called for a European conference, expecting French and British support. When it became clear that Germany would support Austria in the event of war, the French drew back, unwilling to become involved in a war in the Balkans. The British, anxious to avoid a breach with Germany, did no more than protest to Austria–Hungary. The Russians, still smarting from their defeat by Japan, dared not risk another war without the support of their allies. There was to be no help for Serbia; no conference took place, and Austria kept Bosnia. It was a triumph for the Austro-German alliance, *but it had unfortunate results*:

- Serbia remained bitterly hostile to Austria, and it was this quarrel which sparked off the outbreak of war.
- The Russians were determined to avoid any further humiliation and embarked on a massive military build-up and modernization of the army, together with an improvement in their railway system to allow faster mobilization. They intended to be prepared if Serbia should ever appeal for help again.

(d) The Agadir Crisis (1911)

This crisis was caused by further developments in the situation in Morocco. French troops occupied Fez, the Moroccan capital, to put down a rebellion against the Sultan. It looked as if the French were about to annex Morocco. The Germans sent a gunboat, the *Panther*, to the Moroccan port of Agadir, hoping to pressurize the French into giving Germany compensation, perhaps the French Congo. The British were worried in case the Germans acquired Agadir, which could be used as a naval base from which to threaten Britain's trade routes. In order to strengthen French resistance, Lloyd George (Britain's Chancellor of the Exchequer) used a speech which he was due to make at the Lord Mayor of London's banquet at the Mansion House, to warn the Germans off. He said that Britain would not stand by and be taken advantage of 'where her interests were vitally affected'. The French stood firm, making no major concessions, and eventually the German gunboat was removed. The Germans agreed to recognize the French protectorate (the right to 'protect' the country from foreign intervention) over Morocco in return for two strips of territory in the French Congo. This was seen as a triumph for the Entente powers, but in Germany public opinion became intensely anti-British, especially as the British were drawing slowly ahead in the 'naval race'. At the end of 1911 they had built eight of the new and more powerful 'Dreadnought'-type battleships, compared with Germany's four.

(e) The First Balkan War (1912)

The war began when Serbia, Greece, Montenegro and Bulgaria (calling themselves the Balkan League) launched a series of attacks on Turkey. These countries had all, at one time, been part of the Turkish (Ottoman) Empire. Now that Turkey was weak (regarded by the other powers as 'the Sick Man of Europe'), they seized their chance to acquire more land at Turkey's expense. They soon captured most of the remaining Turkish territory in Europe. Together with the German government, Sir Edward Grey, the British Foreign Secretary, arranged a peace conference in London. He was anxious to avoid the conflict spreading, and also to demonstrate that Britain and Germany could still work together. The resulting settlement divided up the former Turkish lands among the Balkan states. However, the Serbs were not happy with their gains: they wanted Albania, which would

Map 1.3 **The Balkans in 1913 showing changes from the Balkan Wars (1912–13)**

give them an outlet to the sea, but the Austrians, with German and British support, insisted that Albania should become an independent state. This was a deliberate Austrian move to prevent Serbia becoming more powerful.

(f) The Second Balkan War (1913)

The Bulgarians were dissatisfied with their gains from the peace settlement and they blamed Serbia. They had been hoping for Macedonia, but most of it had been given to Serbia. Bulgaria therefore attacked Serbia, but their plan misfired when Greece, Romania and Turkey rallied to support Serbia. The Bulgarians were defeated, and by the Treaty of Bucharest (1913), they forfeited most of their gains from the first war (see Map 1.3). It seemed that Anglo-German influence had prevented an escalation of the war by restraining the Austrians, who were itching to support Bulgaria and attack Serbia. In reality, however, *the consequences of the Balkan Wars were serious*:

- Serbia had been strengthened and was determined to stir up trouble among the Serbs and Croats living inside Austria–Hungary;
- the Austrians were equally determined to put an end to Serbia's ambitions;
- the Germans took Grey's willingness to co-operate as a sign that Britain was prepared to be detached from France and Russia.

(g) The assassination of the Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand

This tragic event, which took place in Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia, on 28 June 1914, was the immediate cause of Austria–Hungary's declaration of war on Serbia, which was soon to develop into the First World War. The Archduke, nephew and heir to the Emperor Franz Josef, was paying an official visit to Sarajevo when he and his wife were shot dead by a Serb terrorist, Gavrilo Princip. The Austrians blamed the Serb government and sent a harsh ultimatum. The Serbs accepted most of the demands in it, but the Austrians, with a promise of German support, were determined to use the incident as an excuse for war. On 28 July, Austria–Hungary declared war on Serbia. The Russians, anxious not to let the Serbs down again, ordered a general mobilization (29 July). The German government demanded that this should be cancelled (31 July), and when the Russians failed to comply, Germany declared war on Russia (1 August) and on France (3 August). When German troops entered Belgium on their way to invade France, Britain (who in 1839 had promised to defend Belgian neutrality) demanded their withdrawal. When this demand was ignored, Britain entered the war (4 August). Austria–Hungary declared war on Russia on 6 August. Others countries joined later.

The war was to have profound effects on the future of the world. Germany was soon to be displaced, for a time at least, from her mastery of Europe, and Europe never quite regained its dominant position in the world.

1.4 WHAT CAUSED THE WAR, AND WHO WAS TO BLAME?

It is difficult to analyse why the assassination in Sarajevo developed into a world war, and even now historians cannot agree. Some blame Austria for being the first aggressor by declaring war on Serbia; some blame the Russians because they were the first to order full mobilization; some blame Germany for supporting Austria, and others blame the British for not making it clear that they would definitely support France. If the Germans had

known this, so the argument goes, they would not have declared war on France, and the fighting could have been restricted to eastern Europe.

The point which is beyond dispute is that the quarrel between Austria–Hungary and Serbia sparked off the outbreak of war. The quarrel had become increasingly more explosive since 1908, and the Austrians seized on the assassination as the excuse for a preventive war with Serbia. They genuinely felt that if Serb and Slav nationalist ambitions for a state of Yugoslavia were achieved, it would cause the collapse of the Habsburg Empire; Serbia must be curbed. In fairness, they probably hoped the war would remain localized, like the Balkan Wars. The Austro-Serb quarrel explains the outbreak of the war, but not why it became a world war. *Here are some of the reasons which have been suggested for the escalation of the war.*

(a) The alliance system or 'armed camps' made war inevitable

The American diplomat and historian George Kennan believed that once the 1894 alliance had been signed between France and Russia, the fate of Europe was sealed. As suspicions mounted between the two opposing camps, Russia, Austria–Hungary and Germany got themselves into situations which they could not escape from without suffering further humiliation; war seemed to be the only way for them to save face.

However, many historians think this explanation is not convincing; there had been many crises since 1904, and none of them had led to a major war. In fact, *there was nothing binding about these alliances*. When Russia was struggling in the war against Japan (1904–5), the French sent no help; nor did they support Russia when she protested at the Austrian annexation of Bosnia; Austria took no interest in Germany's unsuccessful attempts to prevent France from taking over Morocco (the Morocco and Agadir Crises, 1906 and 1911); Germany had restrained Austria from attacking Serbia during the Second Balkan War. Italy, though a member of the Triple Alliance, was on good terms with France and Britain, and entered the war *against* Germany in 1915. No power actually declared war because of one of these treaties of alliance.

(b) Colonial rivalry in Africa and the Far East

Again, the argument that German disappointment with their imperial gains and resentment at the success of other powers helped cause the war is not convincing. Although there had certainly been disputes, they had always been settled without war. In early July 1914 Anglo-German relations were good: an agreement favourable to Germany had just been reached over a possible partition of Portuguese colonies in Africa. However, there was one side effect of colonial rivalry which did cause dangerous friction – this was naval rivalry.

(c) The naval race between Britain and Germany

The German government had been greatly influenced by the writings of an American, Alfred Mahan, who believed that sea power was the key to the successful build-up of a great empire. It followed therefore that Germany needed a much larger navy capable of challenging the world's greatest sea power – Britain. Starting with Admiral Tirpitz's Navy Law of 1897, the Germans made a determined effort to expand their navy. The rapid growth of the German fleet probably did not worry the British too much at first because they had an enormous lead. However, the introduction of the powerful British 'Dreadnought' battleship in 1906 changed all this because it made all other battleships

obsolete. This meant that the Germans could begin building 'Dreadnoughts' on equal terms with Britain. The resulting naval race was the main bone of contention between the two right up to 1914. For many of the British, the new German navy could mean only one thing: Germany intended making war against Britain. However, early in 1913 the Germans had actually reduced naval spending in order to concentrate more on strengthening the army. As Winston Churchill correctly pointed out, in the spring and summer of 1914, naval rivalry had ceased to be a cause of friction, because 'it was certain that we (Britain) could not be overtaken as far as capital ships were concerned'.

(d) Economic rivalry

It has been argued that the desire for economic mastery of the world caused German businessmen and capitalists to want war with Britain, which still owned about half the world's tonnage of merchant ships in 1914. Marxist historians like this theory because *it puts the blame for the war on the capitalist system*. But critics of the theory point out that Germany was already well on the way to economic victory; one leading German industrialist remarked in 1913: 'Give us three or four more years of peace and Germany will be the unchallenged economic master of Europe.' On this argument, the last thing Germany needed was a major war.

(e) Russia made war more likely by supporting Serbia

Russian backing probably made Serbia more reckless in her anti-Austrian policy than she might otherwise have been. Russia was the first to order a general mobilization, and it was this Russian mobilization which provoked Germany to mobilize. The Russians were worried about the situation in the Balkans, where both Bulgaria and Turkey were under German influence. This could enable Germany and Austria to control the Dardanelles, the outlet from the Black Sea. It was the main Russian trade route, and Russian trade could be strangled (this happened to some extent during the war). Thus Russia felt threatened, and once Austria declared war on Serbia, saw it as a struggle for survival. The Russians must also have felt that their prestige as leader of the Slavs would suffer if they failed to support Serbia. Possibly the government saw the war as a good idea to divert attention away from domestic problems, though they must also have been aware that involvement in a major war would be a dangerous gamble. Shortly before the outbreak of war, one of the Tsar's ministers, Durnovo, warned that a long war would put a severe strain on the country and could lead to the collapse of the tsarist regime. Perhaps the blame lies more with the Austrians: although they must have hoped for Russian neutrality, they ought to have realized how difficult it would be for Russia to stay neutral in the circumstances.

(f) German backing for Austria was crucially important

It is significant that Germany restrained the Austrians from declaring war on Serbia in 1913, but in 1914 encouraged them to go ahead. The Kaiser sent them a telegram urging them to attack Serbia and promising German help without any conditions attached. This was like giving the Austrians a blank cheque to do whatever they wanted. The important question is: *Why did German policy towards Austria–Hungary change?* This question has caused great controversy among historians, and several different interpretations have been put forward:

1 After the war, when the Germans had been defeated, the Versailles Treaty imposed a harsh peace settlement on Germany. The victorious powers felt the need to justify this by putting all the blame for the war on Germany (see Section 2.8). At the time, most non-German historians went along with this, though German historians were naturally not happy with this interpretation. After a few years, opinion began to move away from laying sole blame on Germany and accepted that other powers should take some of the blame. Then in 1967 a German historian, Fritz Fischer, caused a sensation when he suggested that Germany should, after all, take most of the blame, because they risked a major war by sending the 'blank cheque' to Austria–Hungary. He claimed that Germany deliberately planned for, and provoked war with Russia, Britain and France in order to make Germany the dominant power in the world, both economically and politically, and also as a way of dealing with domestic tensions. In the elections of 1912, the German Socialist Party (SPD) won over a third of the seats in the Reichstag (lower house of parliament), making it the largest single party. Then in January 1914, the Reichstag passed a vote of no confidence in the Chancellor, Bethmann-Hollweg, but he remained in office because the Kaiser had the final say. Obviously a major clash was on the way between the Reichstag, which wanted more power, and the Kaiser and Chancellor, who were determined to resist change. A victorious war seemed a good way of keeping people's minds off the political problems; it would enable the government to suppress the SPD and keep power in the hands of the Kaiser and aristocracy.

   Fischer based his theory partly on evidence from the diary of Admiral von Müller, who wrote about a 'war council' held on 8 December 1912; at this meeting, Moltke (Chief of the German General Staff) said: 'I believe war is unavoidable; war the sooner the better.' Fischer's claims made him unpopular with West German historians, and another German, H. W. Koch, dismissed his theory, pointing out that nothing came of the 'war council'. However, historians in Communist East Germany supported Fischer because his theory laid the blame on capitalists and the capitalist system, which they opposed.

2 Other historians emphasize the time factor involved: the Germans wanted war not only because they felt encircled, but because they felt that the net was closing in on them. They were threatened by superior British naval power and by the massive Russian military expansion. German army expansion was being hampered by opposition from the Reichstag which refused to sanction the necessary tax increases. On the other hand the Russians had been helped by huge loans from the French government. Von Jagow, who was German Foreign Minister at the outbreak of war, reported comments made earlier in 1914 in which Moltke stated that there was no alternative for the Germans but to make 'preventive' war in order to defeat their enemies before they became too powerful. The German generals had decided that a 'preventive' war, *a war for survival*, was necessary, and that it must take place before the end of 1914. They believed that if they waited longer than that, Russia would be too strong.

3 Some historians reject both points 1 and 2 and suggest that Germany did not want a major war at all; the Kaiser, Wilhelm II, and Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg believed that if they took a strong line in support of Austria, that would *frighten the Russians into remaining neutral* – a tragic miscalculation, if true.

(g) The mobilization plans of the great powers

Gerhard Ritter, a leading German historian, believed that the German plan for mobilization, known as the *Schlieffen Plan*, drawn up by Count von Schlieffen in 1905–6, was extremely risky and inflexible and deserved to be seen as the start of disaster both for

Germany and Europe. It gave the impression that Germany was being ruled by a band of unscrupulous militarists.

A. J. P. Taylor argued that these plans, based on precise railway timetables for the rapid movement of troops, accelerated the tempo of events and reduced almost to nil the time available for negotiation. The Schlieffen Plan assumed that France would automatically join Russia; the bulk of German forces were to be sent by train to the Belgian frontier, and through Belgium to attack France, which would be knocked out in six weeks. German forces would then be switched rapidly across Europe to face Russia, whose mobilization was expected to be slow. Once Moltke knew that Russia had ordered a general mobilization, he demanded immediate German mobilization so that the plan could be put into operation as soon as possible. However, Russian mobilization did not necessarily mean war – their troops could be halted at the frontiers; unfortunately the Schlieffen Plan, which depended on the rapid capture of Liège in Belgium, involved the first aggressive act outside the Balkans, when German troops crossed the frontier into Belgium on 4 August, thus violating Belgian neutrality. Almost at the last minute the Kaiser and Bethmann tried to avoid war and urged the Austrians to negotiate with Serbia (30 July), which perhaps supports point 3 above. Wilhelm suggested a partial mobilization against Russia only, instead of the full plan; he hoped that Britain would remain neutral if Germany refrained from attacking France. But Moltke, nervous of being left at the post by the Russians and French, insisted on the full Schlieffen Plan; he said there was no time to change all the railway timetables to send the troop trains to Russia instead of to Belgium. It looks as though *the generals had taken over control of affairs from the politicians*. It also suggests that a British announcement on 31 July of her intention to support France would have made no difference to Germany: it was the Schlieffen Plan or nothing, even though Germany at that point had no specific quarrel with France.

Doubt was cast on this theory by an American military expert and historian, Terence Zuber, in his book *Inventing the Schlieffen Plan* (2002). Using documents from the former East German military archive, he argued that the Schlieffen Plan was only one of at least five alternatives being considered by the German high command in the years after 1900. One alternative dealt with the possibility of a Russian attack at the same time as a French invasion; in this case the Germans would transfer considerable forces by train to the east while holding the French at bay in the west. Schlieffen actually carried out a military exercise to test this plan towards the end of 1905. Zuber concluded that Schlieffen never committed himself to just one plan: he thought war in the west would begin with a French attack and never intended that the Germans should send all their forces into France to destroy the French army in one huge battle. It was only after the war that the Germans tried to blame their defeat on the rigidity and the constraints of the so-called Schlieffen Plan, which had, in fact, never existed in the form they tried to make out.

(h) A 'tragedy of miscalculation'

Another interpretation was put forward by Australian historian L. C. F. Turner. He suggested that the Germans may not have deliberately provoked war and that, in fact, war was not inevitable, and it should have been possible to reach agreement peacefully. The war was actually caused by a 'tragedy of miscalculation'. Most of the leading rulers and politicians seemed to be incompetent and made bad mistakes:

- The Austrians miscalculated by thinking that Russia would not support Serbia.
- Germany made a crucial mistake by promising to support Austria with no conditions attached; therefore the Germans were certainly guilty, as were the Austrians, because they risked a major war.

- Politicians in Russia and Germany miscalculated by assuming that mobilization would not necessarily mean war.
- If Ritter and Taylor are correct, this means that the generals, especially Moltke, miscalculated by sticking rigidly to their plans in the belief that this would bring a quick and decisive victory.

No wonder Bethmann, when asked how it all began, raised his arms to heaven and replied: 'Oh – if I only knew!'

Nevertheless, probably a majority of historians, including many Germans, accept Fritz Fischer's theory as the most convincing one: that the outbreak of war was deliberately provoked by Germany's leaders. For example, in *The Origins of World War I*, a collection of essays edited by Richard Hamilton and Holger H. Herwig (2002), the editors examine and reject most of the suggested causes of the war discussed above (alliance systems, mobilization plans, threat of socialism) and reach the conclusion that ultimate responsibility for the catastrophe probably rests with Germany. The Kaiser and his leading advisers and generals believed that time was running out for them as Russia's vast armament plans neared completion. It was a war to ensure survival, rather than a war to secure world domination, and it had to take place before Germany's position among the Great Powers deteriorated too far for the war to be won. Herwig argues that the German leaders gambled on a victorious war, even though they knew it was likely to last several years. As for world domination – that might well come later. In the words of Moltke, the Germans took this gamble in 1914 in order to fulfil 'Germany's preordained role in civilization', which could 'only be done by way of war'.

In 2007 a new collection of essays edited by Holger Afflerbach and David Stevenson appeared. Entitled *An Improbable War*, the book focused on the single issue: the degree of probability and inevitability in the outbreak of the conflict. Not surprisingly, no consensus was reached, but there was a clear leaning towards the view that in the circumstances that existed in 1914, war was certainly not inevitable, though it was possible. Some of the contributors moved in new directions. For example, Samuel Williamson, a leading expert on the Habsburg Empire, believes that the government in Vienna had not taken a decision to attack Serbia before the assassinations at Sarajevo, because they had other political priorities. Thus the murders of Franz Ferdinand and his wife really did provide the decisive moment: without that there would have been no decision for war in Vienna and therefore no general conflict. Nor does he believe that German pressure and promises of support were important – the Austrian leaders made their own decisions. Another contributor, John Rohl, was more traditional: he argues that the German leaders deliberately started the war and that Wilhelm II bears the main responsibility because of his duplicity and his recklessness.

It is also possible to argue that if Russia's rearmament was indeed making the Germans so nervous, then Russia should bear at least equal responsibility for the outbreak of war. This is the conclusion reached in a new analysis by historian William Mulligan in his book *The Origins of the First World War* (2010). He argues that Russia's defeat by Japan in 1905 had fatal consequences for the peace of Europe. It sparked off a revolution in Russia which severely weakened the government, and it forced the Russians to focus their foreign policies towards the Balkans instead of in the direction of the Far East. This foreign policy had two main aims: the desire for peace and the necessity of winning back their lost prestige. Until 1911 the desire for peace was paramount. But in that year the Russian leading minister, Pyotr Stolypin, who favoured peace, was assassinated, and the government began to succumb to the growing jingoistic public opinion which demanded that action should be taken to increase Russian prestige. Consequently, following the Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913, in February 1914 the tsar promised to help the Serbs in the event of an attack by Austria–Hungary, and signed a naval agreement with Britain which, it was hoped, would

help safeguard Russian access to the Mediterranean, if the Germans and Turks should ever try to block the Dardanelles. Mulligan argues that these new policies had 'a devastating impact on German foreign policy, bringing about an important shift in German thinking about the international system'. The naval agreement outraged the Germans, who saw it as a betrayal by the British; and the promise of backing for Serbia convinced the Germans that it was vital for them to support Austria–-Hungary. Together with the vast Russian military expansion, all this was enough to galvanize the Germans into risking a war for survival, before Russia became any stronger. Perhaps the most sensible conclusion is that Germany, Russia and Austria–Hungary must both share the responsibility for the outbreak of war in 1914.

FURTHER READING

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QUESTIONS

1 Explain why relations between the European states were so full of tensions in the early years of the twentieth century.

2 How far would you agree that the arms race was only one of many causes of the First World War?

3 To what extent was Germany responsible for the outbreak of the First World War?

There is a document question about Germany and the origins of the First World War on the website.