

The Coming of the First World War

TIME LINE

- 1872 Germany, Austria, and Russia form the Three Emperors' League
- 1878 The Congress of Berlin resolves the crisis resulting from the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78
- 1879 Germany and Austria form the Dual Alliance
- 1881 The Three Emperors' League is revived
- 1882 Germany, Austria, and Italy sign the Triple Alliance
- 1887 Germany and Russia sign the Reinsurance Treaty
- 1894 Emperor William II of Germany dismisses Bismarck
- 1904 The Franco-Russian Alliance is signed
- 1905 The Anglo-French Entente is formed
- 1907 Germany provokes the First Moroccan Crisis
- 1908 The Anglo-Russian Entente is formed
- 1911 Austria's annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina leads to the Bosnian Crisis
- 1912-1913 Germany provokes the Second Moroccan Crisis The Balkan Wars are fought
- 1914 Archduke Francis Ferdinand is assassinated at Sarajevo
World War I begins

In European international relations, the 1870s and 1880s were truly the Age of Bismarck. During these decades, Bismarck's Germany dominated European diplomacy, establishing ties with Austria, Russia, and Italy and maintaining cordial relations with Great Britain. As a consequence, France remained isolated.

After Bismarck was dismissed as Germany's chancellor in 1890, his less capable successors let the ties with Russia lapse. Before long, France emerged at the center of a new diplomatic system. The French created an alliance with Russia, established an understanding with Great Britain, and succeeded in drawing Italy away from its ties to Germany and Austria.

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As the alliance system divided Europe into armed camps, a series of international crises in the years after 1900 moved the powers closer to war.

The European Great Powers

In 1871, the ranks of the great powers included Germany, France, Great Britain, Austria, Russia, and Italy.

Germany

Otto von Bismarck (1815-1898), Germany's chancellor, regarded Germany as a satisfied power. He believed that Germany, having achieved its national unification, had no further territorial ambitions. Instead, it needed to consolidate its domestic institutions, promote its economic development, and maintain its position as the most powerful state on the European continent. The achievement of these goals required peace and stability in Europe, which, in Bismarck's view, could best be secured by isolating France.

France

France desired to regain the provinces of Alsace and Lorraine, which it had lost to Germany in 1871, but the French were too weak to challenge Germany without the assistance of an ally. For the time being, the French contented themselves with imperial expansion in Africa and Asia.

Great Britain

Great Britain sought to maintain its "splendid isolation" from the affairs of the European continent and to focus its attention on the far-flung British Empire. Britain's imperial interests in Africa and Asia conflicted especially with those of France and Russia.

Austria

Austria took essentially a defensive position, seeking to limit the growth of Slavic nationalism within its own borders and to the southeast in the Balkans. Slavic nationalism threatened Austria's survival.

Russia

Russia continued its traditional expansionist policies in an effort to advance its power both in East Asia and in the Balkans. The competing interests of Austria and Russia in the Balkans led to disputes between the two powers.

Italy

Italy sought opportunities to advance its claims to great-power status. Its efforts to build a North African empire led to disputes with France.

The Three Emperors' League (1872)

Bismarck's efforts to preserve European peace and stability by keeping France isolated achieved their first success in the formation of the Three Emperors' League (the Dreikaiserbund) in 1872. Germany's Emperor William I, Austria's Emperor Francis Joseph, and Russia's Tsar Alexander II pledged to cooperate in efforts to maintain peace and the status quo.

The Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78

Austro-Russian rivalry in the Balkans presented a serious threat to Bismarck's efforts to maintain Germany's ties with both Austria and Russia.

In 1876, a revolt against Ottoman rule broke out in Bulgaria. In suppressing the Bulgarian revolt, the Turks slaughtered thousands. The two small autonomous Balkan states of Serbia and Montenegro responded by declaring war on the Ottoman Empire. The Russians asserted their self-proclaimed role as the protectors of the Slavs and Orthodox Christians in the Ottoman Empire, going to war against Turkey in 1877.

Treaty of San Stefano (1878)

The Russians forced the Turks to accept the Treaty of San Stefano of March 1878. This treaty established the independence of Serbia, Montenegro, and Rumania and granted autonomy to a large Bulgaria, including most of Macedonia with access to the

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Aegean Sea. Bulgaria would be under Russian domination. The treaty awarded Batum and Kars and other Turkish lands in the Caucasus to Russia.

Threat of Anglo-Russian War

The Treaty of San Stefano substantially increased Russian power in the Balkans and thereby threatened Austrian interests in the region. While the Austrians protested Russia's gains, so, too, did the British, who feared the advance of Russian power toward the eastern Mediterranean. They sent units of their fleet to the Turkish Straits, which joined the Black and Aegean seas, and threatened to go to war against Russia.

The Congress of Berlin (1878)

In an effort to prevent a major war, Bismarck presented himself as an "honest broker" and invited the great powers to send representatives to a meeting in Berlin.

The Treaty of Berlin

The Congress of Berlin replaced the Treaty of San Stefano with a new treaty, the Treaty of Berlin (1878). This treaty confirmed the independence of Serbia, Montenegro, and Rumania, as well as the Russian acquisition of Batum and Kars. The size of Bulgaria was reduced. The northern area, Bulgaria proper, would be autonomous. To the south, Eastern Rumelia would be semiautonomous. Further to the south, the Turks would retain full sovereignty over Macedonia. (Eastern Rumelia united with Bulgaria in 1885.)

Austrian Gains

As compensation for the increase of Russian influence in the Balkans, Austria received the right to occupy and administer the Turkish provinces of Bosnia and Herzegovina, although the Austrians were not to annex them. The British gained the right to occupy the island of Cyprus in the eastern Mediterranean.

Bismarck intended this settlement as a compromise that would recognize Russian predominance in the eastern Balkans and Austrian control of the western Balkans. In reality, the settlement favored Austria by substantially reducing the gains made by the Russians in their war against the Turks.

The Dual Alliance (1879)

Austro-Russian conflict in the Balkans led to the collapse of the Three Emperors' League. In 1879, Bismarck concluded a secret defensive alliance with Austria. This Dual Alliance provided for mutual aid in the event either partner was attacked by Russia.

Revival of the Three Emperors' League (1881)

Bismarck hoped to restore the close relationship between Germany and Russia. In 1881, his efforts succeeded with the reestablishment of the Three Emperors' League. This association of the German, Austrian, and Russian rulers remained fragile, however, as a result of continuing Austro-Russian conflict over the Balkans.

The Triple Alliance (1882)

In 1881, the French established a protectorate over Tunisia in North Africa. This angered the Italians, who responded by seeking closer ties with Germany and Austria. In 1882, Italy joined Germany and Austria in a secret defensive alliance, the Triple Alliance. Bismarck now had ties with Italy as well as with Austria and Russia. In addition, Germany remained on good terms with Great Britain. France was thus more completely isolated than ever.

The Reinsurance Treaty (1887)

Continued Austro-Russian tension in the Balkans led to the Russian decision in 1887 not to renew the Three Emperors' League. However, the Russians wanted to maintain their relationship with Germany, and the two powers signed the Reinsurance Treaty of 1887. The treaty provided for benevolent

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neutrality in case either partner became involved in war unless Germany attacked France or Russia attacked Austria. Germany had no intention of attacking France. The provision that Germany would not be obliged to observe benevolent neutrality in the event of a Russian attack on Austria made the terms of the Reinsurance Treaty compatible with Germany's obligations under the Dual Alliance.

The Dismissal of Bismarck (1890)

In 1890, Emperor William II dismissed Bismarck as Germany's chancellor. Bismarck's successors proved far less capable than the Iron Chancellor had been, and Germany's international position quickly deteriorated.

In 1890, the Germans decided not to renew the Reinsurance Treaty with Russia, fearing it would be impossible to balance Germany's commitments to both Russia and Austria. The Germans believed that breaking the tie with Russia would pose no threat to Germany's interests since autocratic Russia and revolutionary, republican France were so ideologically antagonistic that an alliance between them was inconceivable. This belief proved to be mistaken.

The Franco-Russian Alliance (1894)

In the early 1890s, a diplomatic revolution began as long-isolated France and newly isolated Russia began to draw together. The rapprochement between France and Russia resulted in the signing of a secret military alliance in 1894. At the time, the Franco-Russian Alliance seemed directed primarily against Great Britain, the main rival of both France and Russia in the Mediterranean and Asia.

Deterioration of Anglo-German Relations

By the 1890s, Anglo-German relations became less cordial than they had been when Bismarck directed German policy. William II's telegram of support to President Paul Kruger of the Transvaal in

1896 angered the British (see Chapter 27), and they were alarmed by Germany's development of a high-seas fleet.

The Anglo-French Entente (1904)

Although colonial disputes contributed an element of tension to Anglo-French relations, the French believed that Germany, rather than Great Britain, posed the greater threat to France. In 1898, at the time of the Fashoda Crisis (see Chapter 27), Théophile Delcassé (1852-1923), the French foreign minister, urged the French government to give way to Great Britain in the Sudan. The French withdrawal from the Sudan marked the beginning of a reorientation of French policy.

During the Boer War, widespread international hostility to Great Britain convinced the British that isolation was dangerous. The first step in Britain's abandonment of isolation came in 1902, when the British signed an alliance with Japan. The Anglo-Japanese Alliance was directed primarily against the threat of Russian expansion in East Asia.

Anglo-French negotiations led to the conclusion of the Entente Cordiale in 1904. This diplomatic understanding dealt with colonial issues. The French recognized British dominance in Egypt, while the British agreed to support French claims to Morocco. The British and French also settled other differences in Africa and Asia and resolved a long-standing dispute about fishing rights in the North Atlantic off Newfoundland.

Following the conclusion of the Anglo-French Entente, the two countries began to consult on international issues of mutual interest.

Secret Italo-French Agreement (1902)

By the early 1900s, Germany's international position had deteriorated considerably. The Triple Alliance of Germany, Austria, and Italy remained in effect, but France actively sought to improve its relations with Italy. In 1902, Italy reached a secret agreement with France, promising to support French efforts to

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establish a protectorate over Morocco in exchange for French support of Italian ambitions elsewhere in North Africa. As Italy improved its relations with France, Austria became Germany's only reliable ally.

The First Moroccan Crisis (1905)

Emperor William II and his chancellor, Prince Bernhard von Bülow (1849-1929), attempted to improve Germany's diplomatic position. In 1905, the Germans provoked a crisis over Morocco, where the French were in the process of creating a protectorate. In March 1905, William II went to Tangier, where he declared that Germany had interests in Morocco and spoke in support of Moroccan independence. The Germans expected that Russia, which was being defeated by Japan, could not assist France, and they hoped that Britain would give France only token support. If these things happened, France's ties with Russia and Great Britain would be weakened.

The Algeiras Conference (1906)

The Germans pressed for an international conference to consider the status of Morocco. The conference met in early 1906 at Algeiras in southern Spain, near Gibraltar.

At Algeiras the Germans found themselves virtually isolated, securing only the support of Austria. Great Britain and Russia both supported France, as did Italy. France could now proceed with the establishment of its protectorate over Morocco.

Germany's belligerent attitude during the First Moroccan Crisis created an unfavorable impression and brought France, Russia, and Great Britain together more closely.

The Anglo-Russian Entente (1907)

The Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05 (see Chapter 27) created a difficult situation for France. Russia, France's ally, was at war with Britain's ally, Japan, while at the same time, France was working to achieve a diplomatic understanding with Great Britain.

Nevertheless, the Anglo-French Entente was concluded, and the British supported France at the Algeiras Conference.

Japan's defeat of Russia reduced Britain's fears of Russian expansion in East Asia, although British and Russian interests continued to clash in Persia and Afghanistan.

With the encouragement of the French, London and St. Petersburg sought to resolve their differences. The Anglo-Russian Entente of 1907 recognized a Russian sphere of influence in northern Persia and a British sphere in the south. The Russians agreed to withdraw from Afghanistan, while both countries promised to respect the territorial integrity of Tibet. With these differences resolved, Britain and Russia could seek to collaborate in European affairs.

The Triple Entente

The Anglo-Russian Entente of 1907 completed the process of establishing the Triple Entente of France, Great Britain, and Russia. The Triple Entente faced the Triple Alliance of Germany, Austria, and Italy. The two power blocs were not as evenly balanced as that would suggest, however. As noted above, Italy was less than completely faithful to its alliance partners. In the years since Bismarck's dismissal in 1890, the diplomatic balance of power in Europe had shifted dramatically in France's favor.

The Bosnian Crisis (1908-09)

A series of international crises in the years after 1907 increased tension and uncertainty in Europe and contributed to the outbreak of war in 1914. With Austria as its only reliable ally, Germany could no longer seek to restrain Austria's activities in the Balkans as it had in the past. This increased the possibility that a crisis in the Balkans could escalate, thereby endangering the peace of Europe.

In September 1908, Alois von Aehrenthal (1854-1912), the Austrian foreign minister, met his Russian counterpart, Alexander Izvolsky (1856-1919), at Buchlau. In the Buchlau Agreement, the two statesmen agreed that Russia would support Austria's efforts to

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annex Bosnia and Herzegovina. In return, Austria would support Russia's efforts to gain the right to send its warships through the Turkish Straits.

Evidently the gains by Austria and Russia were intended to be simultaneous. However, in October 1908, Austria unilaterally proclaimed the annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This action infuriated the Russians. Serbia was also angry, since the Serbs had hoped that they might one day be able to annex Bosnia and Herzegovina.

As the crisis mounted, Germany gave Austria its full support. The threat of war with both Austria and Germany forced the Russians to back down in the spring of 1909. The Bosnian Crisis thus ended with Russia's humiliation.

The Second Moroccan Crisis (1911)

In 1911, Germany renewed its objections to the establishment of a French protectorate over Morocco. The Germans sent a warship, the Panther, to the Moroccan port of Agadir, ostensibly to protect German interests. Tension eased when the French agreed to cede part of the French Congo to Germany in return for German recognition of the French position in Morocco.

Once again, Germany's belligerent diplomacy caused alarm. In 1912, the British navy began to concentrate its warships in the North Sea, while the French shifted the bulk of their navy to the Mediterranean. The British now had at least a moral obligation to protect France's northern coast in the event of war. The Entente Cordiale of 1904 had come close to being converted into a full alliance.

The Italo-Turkish War (1911-12)

In 1911, Italy went to war against the Ottoman Empire in an attempt to take control of Tripoli (Libya) in northern Africa. The Italians desired Tripoli both for reasons of national prestige and to compensate for the French acquisition of Morocco. The Italians

easily defeated the Turks, and the peace treaty, signed in 1912, awarded Tripoli to Italy.

The First Balkan War (1912-13)

Italy's easy victory over the Turks encouraged the small Balkan states to press their demands against the Ottoman Empire. Under Russian patronage, Bulgaria, Serbia, Montenegro, and Greece had formed the Balkan League. In 1912, the Balkan League went to war against Turkey. Under the terms of the Treaty of London (May 1913), the defeated Ottoman Empire lost all its territory in Europe except for the area immediately adjacent to the Turkish Straits.

As the First Balkan War drew to a close, both Austria and Russia intervened diplomatically. The Russians supported Serbia's demand for access to the Adriatic Sea, while the Austrians urged the creation of a new Balkan state, Albania, to contain Serbia's expansion. An international conference held in London in 1913 supported Austria's position. The establishment of Albania represented not only a setback for Serbia, but for Russia, as well. Once again the Russians had had to give way in the Balkans.

The Second Balkan War (1913)

Having been denied access to the Adriatic, Serbia demanded part of Bulgaria's share of Macedonia as compensation. Bulgaria, on the other hand, believed that its role in the First Balkan War entitled her to even more of Macedonia.

These disputes among the Balkan states resulted in the outbreak of the Second Balkan War in 1913. Serbia, Montenegro, Greece, Rumania, and Turkey joined to defeat Bulgaria. The Treaty of Bucharest (August 1913) forced Bulgaria to cede territory to Rumania, while Serbia and Greece gained most of Macedonia.

The crises in the Balkans had been serious, although they had not led to a general war. Nevertheless, the situation remained filled with danger. Russia's ambitions in the Balkans and the Turkish Straits had been frustrated. The Russians felt compelled to support

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Serbia more firmly in the future, while the Germans believed it was essential to back Austria.

The Sarajevo Crisis

On June 28, 1914, the final crisis began at Sarajevo, the capital of the Austrian province of Bosnia. A South Slav nationalist, Gavrilo Princip (1895-1918), assassinated Archduke Francis Ferdinand (1863-1914), the heir to the Austrian throne, and his wife. A secret South Slav nationalist organization, Union or Death, also known as the Black Hand, had planned the assassination and had assisted Princip in carrying out the plot. Although the Serbian government was not directly involved, some Serbian officials were aware of the plot but took no action either to prevent its execution or to warn the Austrians.

The Outbreak of War

Austrian Demands on Serbia

Convinced that the Serbian government bore responsibility for the assassination, Austria was determined to settle accounts with Serbia, which had been encouraging nationalist unrest among South Slavs within the borders of the Dual Monarchy. The Austrians hoped to wage a limited war against Serbia and dispatched a stern ultimatum to the Serbian government on July 23. While Serbia did not accept all of Austria's demands, the reply was moderate enough to warrant further negotiations. However, determined to press forward against Serbia, the Austrians declared war on July 28.

The German "Blank Check"

Germany had earlier indicated its readiness to support Austria fully, issuing the so-called blank check to the Austrian government. Instead of trying to restrain the Austrians, the Germans appeared to be encouraging them to move against Serbia, whatever the risk of a general war might be.

Declarations of War

It was impossible for the Russians to accept another setback in the Balkans, and they were determined to back Serbia. On July 30, Tsar Nicholas II ordered a general mobilization of his armies. Germany responded by sending Russia an ultimatum, demanding an end to Russian mobilization. When the Russians refused, Germany declared war on Russia on August 1. The Germans asked the French government about its intentions in the event of a Russo-German war. France replied that it would “act in accordance with its interests.” On August 3, Germany declared war on France.

The German general staff had established a plan for fighting a war on two fronts against both Russia and France. Assuming that Russia would mobilize slowly, this Schlieffen Plan called for a massive assault on France. When the French had been defeated, the Germans would then turn against Russia. The success of the Schlieffen Plan depended not only on rapid German mobilization but also on a speedy defeat of France. The Germans calculated that this objective could most readily be achieved by invading France by way of Belgium, even though this would involve a violation of Belgian neutrality, which the European powers had guaranteed by treaty in 1839. German troops invaded Belgium on August 3. Great Britain responded by declaring war on Germany the following day.

As dusk fell in London on August 4, 1914, Sir Edward Grey (1862-1933), the British foreign secretary, uttered an epitaph for the age that had ended: “The lamps are going out all over Europe; we shall not see them lit again in our lifetime.”

During the Age of Bismarck from 1871 to 1890, Germany stood at the center of the European power balance, maintaining close ties with Austria, Russia, and Italy. Following Bismarck's dismissal from office in 1890, the balance began to shift in favor of France. The French formed an alliance with Russia in 1894 and a decade later, the Anglo-French Entente came into being. France also succeeded in drawing Italy away from its ties to Germany and Austria in the Triple Alliance.

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In the early years of the twentieth century, international relations in Europe began to deteriorate as a result of a series of crises, focusing particularly on the Balkans, where Austro-Russian rivalry intensified. The last of these Balkans crises, the assassination of Archduke Francis Ferdinand at Sarajevo, led to the outbreak of the First World War.