THE ORIGINS OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

By reinterpreting the years before 1914 **William Mulligan** sees the 'July Crisis' in a fresh perspective.

Above: This French cartoon of 1905 depicts Edward VII, Wilhelm II and the French foreign minister Delcassé playing cat and mouse with Morocco. Why was the second Moroccan (Agadir) Crisis so much more significant than the first?

The history of international relations in the late 19th and early 20th twentieth centuries has been inextricably bound with the origins of the First World War. The sheer scale of the war has led generations of academics to endow it with a sense of inevitability. However, we should pause briefly and consider some of the following observations and questions. If the international system was so militarised, why did a general European war not break out much earlier? After all, the 44 years of great power peace between 1871 and 1914 was the longest period of great power peace in Europe until the end of the Cold War. Why were so many crises, recited by generations of students as signs of weakness in the international system, resolved without recourse to war? Historians have, until very recently, largely ignored an alternative question: 'Why was peace maintained for over four decades?' Only by answering this question can we fully appreciate why war broke out in 1914. We should no longer view those like Stefan Zweig, the Austrian novelist, who saw the world before 1914 as a 'golden age of security', as complacent or naïve. Asking why great power peace was maintained for over four decades enables us to re-assess what might be called the 'old reliables' of the origins of the First World War – the alliances and diplomacy, imperial expansion, public opinion, the role of the military, and the international economy.

Alliances

The wars of mid-century – the Crimean War and the wars of Italian and German unification – reshaped the map of Europe, but they also settled the most significant territorial disputes between the great powers. While the annexation of Alsace and Lorraine to the new German Reich capped a humiliating defeat for France, the reconquest of these two provinces was never a realistic policy goal, until after war began in 1914. Likewise Italian irredentist claims against Austria did not drive Italian foreign policy. The great powers' acceptance of the territorial settlement of the wars of Italian and German unification underpinned peace in Europe.

Before 1914 the European great

powers divided into two diplomatic blocks. In 1879 Germany and Austria formed the Dual Alliance. In 1882 Italy formed the Triple Alliance with these two states, an arrangement renewed until the war. Seeking escape from isolation, France and Russia formed an alliance in 1894. Based on common interests in Africa and central Asia, Britain concluded an entente with France in 1904 and with Russia in 1907. These alliances proved flexible and defensive, as members enjoyed greater security and exercised restraint when diplomatic partners wanted to take more extreme measures. During the tense Bosnian crisis in 1909, for example, France made clear it would not support Russian demands in the Balkans. Two years later, Russia repaid the compliment, as St Petersburg and Berlin signed an agreement over their interests in Persia and the Ottoman empire, while France and Germany were embroiled in a bitter crisis in Morocco. Germany often restrained Austria in the Balkans, while Austria made clear that it would not support Germany's colonial ambitions. The British Foreign Secretary, Edward Grey, sought to restrain France and Russia by insisting that Britain could not commit to an alliance and reserved the right to abstain or to enter a European war depending on the specific circumstances. States would only come to the aid of their allies in the case of a defensive war. In short, the defensive orientation of the alliance system restrained states from acts of clear aggression.

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Moreover the alliance system permitted flexibility. States cooperated on issues of specific interest, irrespective of the membership of blocks. In 1897, Austria and Russia agreed to preserve the status quo in the Balkans and they continued to cooperate after a coup in 1903 replaced the murdered pro-Habsburg monarchy with a pro-Russian king in Serbia. On the eve of war, Britain, France, and Germany agreed on their spheres of influence in the declining Ottoman empire. These same three countries played an important role in trying to resolve tensions between Austria and Russia in the Balkans in 1912 and 1913. They had limited success, but diplomats acknowledged that the emerging Anglo-German détente had helped to preserve peace. In December 1912, Grey convened an ambassadorial conference of the great powers in order to bring a resolution to the Balkan wars. Again it enjoyed a limited but important success – it could not impose the will of the great powers on the Balkan states, but it did preserve peace between the great powers. As Grey recognised, the diplomatic process of gathering representatives of the great powers around the table was an important bond of peace and restraint on war. Other diplomatic instruments, admittedly of lesser importance, such as arbitration, international boundary commissions, and the neutralisation of important waterways and territories, showed that a dense network of arrangements underpinned peace and stability in great power politics. The culture and norms of diplomacy were far removed from the anarchic *Realpolitik* so often ascribed to the international system.

Imperialism

Great power peace facilitated imperial expansion around the globe, which in turn reinforced peace in Europe. European violence against African and Asian states was a cause and consequence of peace in Europe. Great power crises over rivalries in Africa and Asia occurred periodically between the 1880s and 1911, but few of these crises threatened to end in war. Governments recognised that provoking a general European war over a colonial dispute would be unacceptable to their own citizens and that the costs of war would outweigh any potential gain. Great powers regularly cooperated in suppressing threats to European interests, as happened during the Boxer rebellion in China for example. Territorial expansion could also be used to compensate states for setbacks and losses in Europe. French expansion was the most prominent example of this, but Russia's expansion in the Far East and central Asia did much to alleviate the anger at its limited gains following the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-8. The deals and compromises that shaped great power diplomacy in Africa and Asia were part of what Winston Churchill described as the 'nods and winks' that sustained peace in Europe.

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Arms Races

The persistence of great power peace did not mean that states turned their swords into ploughshares. They needed swords to defend their empires and also their borders in Europe. Within Europe the vast investments in conscript armies and new military and naval technologies were primarily for the purpose of defence. Concepts of deterrence, so central to the Cold War, emerged before 1914. The French Premier, Raymond Poincaré, declared that the 'peoples most faithful to the idea of peace are obliged to remain prepared for any eventuality', while the German Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg justified the arms bills of 1912 and 1913 as necessary for the Reich's security. Statesmen adopted the Roman adage: to live in peace, prepare for war.

It is important to distinguish between the motives behind great power military policy before 1914 and its consequences. Statesmen, soldiers, and the general public were aware that a general European war would have catastrophic consequences. Even in 1870 Bismarck recognised that the continued French resistance after the Prussian victory over the conventional French army at Sedan marked a shift in warfare, away from limited and short wars to wars between nations, which were much less amenable to political control. Both liberals and conservatives around Europe agreed

that preserving peace was essential to the maintenance of economic prosperity, social stability, and political institutions. In spring 1914, Peter Durnovo, a Russian conservative, warned Nicholas II that a war between Russia and Germany would bring about revolution. Helmuth von Moltke, victor at Sedan, warned the Reichstag in 1890 that the next general European war would be akin to a Thirty Years' War. Very few statesmen or soldiers believed that the next war would be short. For statesmen, at least, this induced caution. Moreover civilian governments were able to keep control over their military men in deciding on questions of war and peace. General staff officers in Vienna and Berlin regularly called for preventive war, but found themselves blocked by resolute ministers. On one occasion, Bernhard von Bülow, Chancellor in 1900-09, recalled Bismarck's dictum that preventive war was like committing suicide for fear of death. Franz Conrad von Hötzendorff was dismissed from his post as the Austrian Chief of the General Staff in November 1911 after calling for a war against Italy; he did, however, return a year later as Austrian policy radicalised.

Nevertheless governments, often spurred on by military advisers, sanctioned increased expenditure on arms. Before 1914, there were a number of arms races in Europe. These did not necessarily lead to war. The Anglo-German naval race had effectively ended by 1912, as Germany could not keep up with British naval expenditure. Following the Second Moroccan Crisis, however, Germany shifted its expenditure to increasing the size of its army. Nervous about French and Russian military power, Germany passed army bills in 1912 and 1913. The Third Republic responded by lengthening the period of service for conscripts from two to three years, increasing its mobilising power. In November 1913 Nicholas II agreed to the so called 'Big Programme', for which the Russian parliament, the Duma, passed funding on 22 June 1914. Austria also increased its military expenditure, while Italy, the Ottoman empire, and the Balkan states were fighting, re-arming, and running up deficits in the years before the war. The arms race between Germany on the one hand and France and Russia on the other hand was one of the most destabilising features of international politics. In Germany, general staff officers began to speak of a window of opportunity, during which Germany would have to attack France and Russia before the Reich fell behind and was overwhelmed by the superior resources of her neighbours. Losing the arms race meant risking the loss of diplomatic freedom of action and ultimately great power status.

Above: This illustration from *Punch* in 1908 depicts the nations of Europe scarcely able to keep the lid on the 'Balkan Troubles'. Was a major conflict inevitable sooner or later?

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Public Opinion

In part the arms race in 1912 and 1913 was spurred by nationalist and militarist associations, which condemned their governments' alleged passivity in the face of external threats. Some historians have pointed to the increasing popular militarism and radical nationalism as causes for the war. However, it is important to distinguish between the bombast generated by these groups and more general trends in public opinion. The largest parties in Britain and Germany, the Liberals and the SPD respectively, favoured the peace-

ful resolution of international crises, arbitration, and limitations on arms. In France parties approving the Three Year Law narrowly won the 1914 election, but support for lengthier periods of conscription was predicated on the need to defend France, not attack Germany. We know less about public opinion in Austria and Russia, but what we know suggests that popular opinion preferred peace to war. In Italy, the experiences of the war against the Ottoman empire in 1911 and 1912 poured cold water on militaristic enthusiasm. In short, there is little evidence that European popular attitudes were bellicose before 1914. Moreover governments were aware that their citizens would not tolerate an obvious war of aggression – hence the care taken in 1914 by all belligerent powers to demonstrate their defensive credentials. Opinion could be manipulated, but public opinion in Europe acted as a restraint on war.

Yet one important qualification should be added: Europeans were prepared to go to war in defence of their state or country. Most Europeans could be classed as 'defensive patriots'. In Germany, for example, the SPD and trade unions, which had been cast as enemies of the Fatherland, decided to support the war effort in 1914 because a Russian victory would sweep away the welfare institutions that benefited ordinary workers. This form of 'defensive patriotism' served to strengthen peace in Europe between the 1870s and 1914.

Europe's Economies

After 1871 stability in the international system underpinned economic growth. In turn international trade and finance strengthened peace in Europe. By the eve of the First World War bankers from different countries regularly combined to fund large projects. Manufacturers set up branches in other countries. In 1913 the German industrialist, Hugo Stinnes, bought coalmines in the north of England. Businessmen recognised that peace was the pre-condition for profitable business. Paul Rouvier, the financier-turned-politician, warned during the First Moroccan Crisis that 'everything revolves around credit. Now nations are closely bound to each other by the links of credit. A war in Europe would bring about a general disaster.' There were trade and financial rivalries, but these were determined by political interests. For example, trade wars between Russia and Germany in the early 1890s and between Germany and Britain around the turn of the century followed political tensions. While politicians sometimes employed militaristic language to describe these disputes over trade, none of them threatened to spill into military conflict. Likewise bankers interested in investing in partnerships with banks from other states sometimes found their schemes blocked by governments. Hence the plans of Barings Bank in London to help Deutsche Bank fund the building of the Berlin-Baghdad railway were skewered by feverish denunciations of German plots in nationalist journals in Britain.

Above: The arrest of Gavrilo Princip, 28 June 1914. Why did the assassination of Franz Ferdinand unleash issues of momentous importance?

The Bonds of Peace

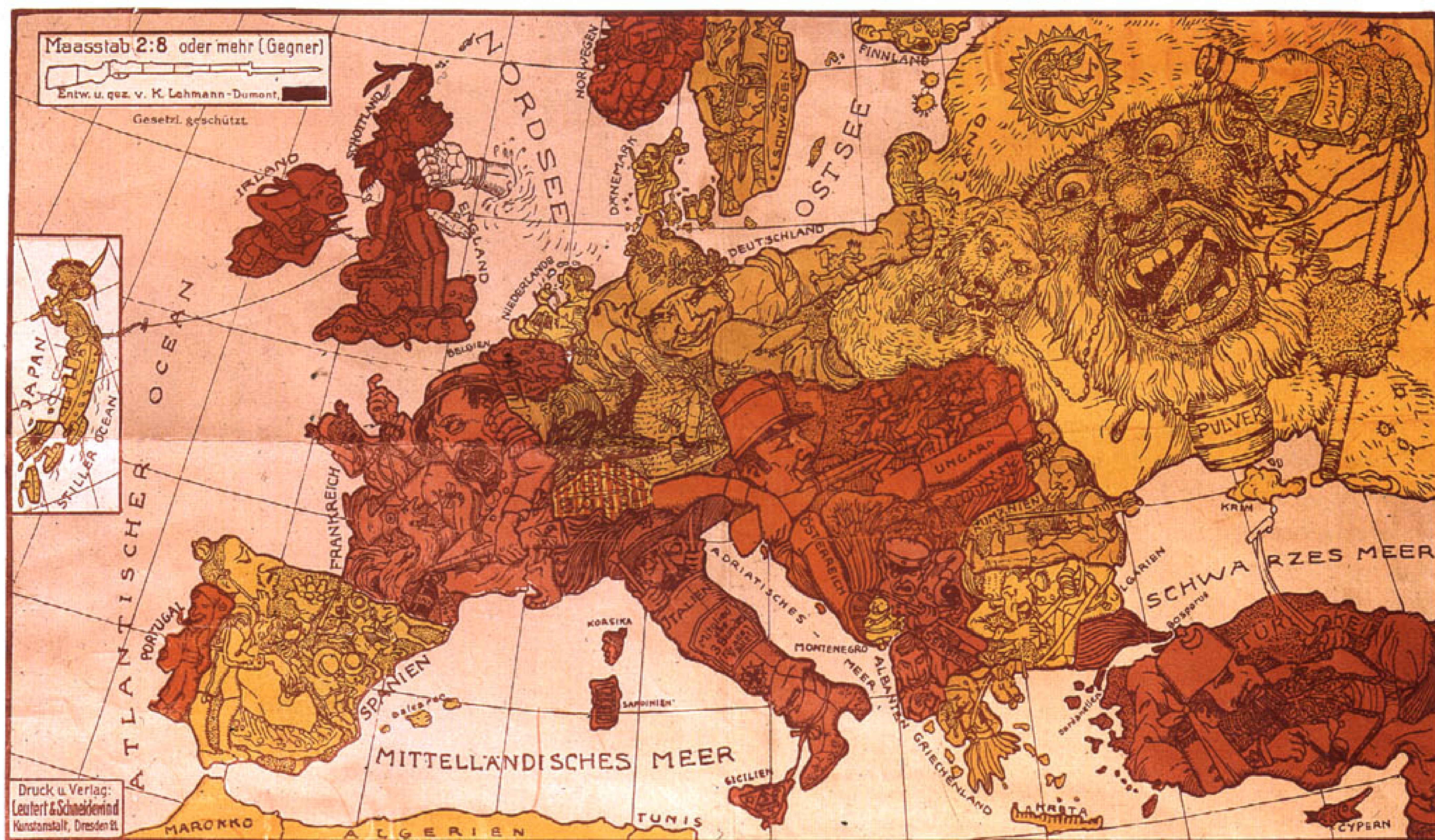
Clearly, the history of international politics between 1871 and 1914 was one of achievements. Peace between the great powers had been preserved, new diplomatic institutions and norms had been established, and wars successfully localised. This had provided the basis for economic prosperity, cultural exchange, and imperial expansion. In 1910, 40 years after the last great power war, Europeans had good reason to be optimistic about their future.

The Balkan Wars and their Impact

So why, then, given the benefits of peace and the restraints on war, did the First World War occur? Briefly a series of crises and wars, starting in 1911, undermined the bonds of peace, led Austria, Russia, and Germany to fear for their great power status, and culminated in the outbreak of a general European war in 1914.

The chain of events began in 1911. A dispute between a German company and a Franco-German consortium over commercial rights in Morocco escalated into a serious international crisis. The outcome confirmed French political predominance in Morocco. In turn this triggered a 1902 agreement between France and Italy, according to which the latter claimed primacy in the province of Tripoli, part of the Ottoman empire. Italy declared war on the Ottoman empire and invaded Tripoli in September 1911. The Italian-Ottoman conflict lasted until the summer of 1912 and weakened both states.

The Ottoman empire now found itself in a vulnerable position in south-eastern Europe. Here Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece, and Montenegro formed the Balkan League in February 1912. The Italian-Ottoman war presented the



Above: This German cartoon from 1914 depicts the map of Europe as a warring jungle. Yet the tensions had been successfully contained over the previous decades.

Balkan states with an opportunity to push the empire out of what remained of its European territories. In October 1912 the League declared war against the Ottoman empire and won a quick victory. The great powers intervened: the Concert of Europe convened in an ambassadors' conference, and imposed the treaty of London on the belligerent states. Yet Bulgaria, smarting at its limited gains at the conference table, declared war on its erstwhile allies in July 1913. It proved a disaster for Bulgaria, as Serbia inflicted a decisive defeat and the Ottoman empire regained some of its lost territory. This second Balkan War ended with the treaty of Bucharest.

These crises and wars undermined the bonds of peace in significant ways. First, the limits of great power control over events within Europe were exposed. Owing to rivalry between Russia and Austria in the Balkans, the Concert of Europe was unable to impose its will on the Balkan states. Austria, in particular, lost faith in multilateral diplomacy. Vienna issued ultimatums to Serbia, often without securing the backing of its allies, Germany and Italy. The alliance was losing its effectiveness as a restraint. Second, the Moroccan crisis created a sense of insecurity in Germany. The army bill of 1912 was supposed to remedy this, but instead it triggered an arms race, which increased German vulnerability and undermined attempts to forge a rapprochement with France and Russia. In turn the arms race was accompanied by the tightening of military and diplomatic ties between Paris and St Petersburg, which deepened divisions within a previously flexible alliance system. Anglo-German détente in 1912 and 1913 was the most important bond of peace in the diplomatic system. However, in the spring of 1914 Britain agreed to a naval convention with Russia. Although Grey perceived this as a minor adjustment of the Triple Entente, it destroyed German confidence in its détente with Britain. In June 1914 Bethmann decided that, in the next diplomatic crisis, Germany would have to stand full-square with its Austrian ally, rather than cooperate and mediate with Britain.

Great Power Gambles

Crucially three great powers – Austria, Russia, and Germany – feared for their great power status. They opted for a more assertive policy, one prepared to risk a general European war, even if they would have preferred to bolster their position without one.

Austria had most justification for these fears, given the growth of Serbian power and the demands of South Slavs within the Habsburg empire. Statesmen in Vienna feared that the Habsburg empire would crumble slowly, like the Ottoman empire. In this context, war was considered a reasonable risk. Better a defeat on the field of battle than slow disintegration in peace, claimed the Austrian commander in Sarajevo, General Oscar Potiorek. By October 1913 Leopold Berchtold, the Foreign Minister, believed that war against Serbia was inevitable, with only the precise timing an issue.

During these discussions about policy towards Serbia, Austrian leaders ignored the wider European dimension and the question of Russia's reaction to an Austro-Serbian war. This blinkered focus on Austria's position in the Balkans reflected both the declining great power status of the Habsburg empire and the sense that the European system was failing to preserve Austria's vital interests.

In February 1914 the Ministerial Council in Russia decided to adopt

a more assertive policy in future crises. In 1912 and 1913 Russian policy had suffered setbacks in the Ottoman empire and the Balkans. Sazanov, the Russian Foreign Minister, ascribed these setbacks to a perception that Russia would preserve peace at any price and therefore other powers expected St Petersburg to back down in confrontations. This was unworthy of Russia's prestige as a great power. The next crisis would be a testing ground to demonstrate renewed Russian assertiveness. In contrast to Austria, Russia's sense of decline was related to its great power prestige, not a threat to its existence.

Finally, in June 1914, Bethmann, concerned at the encirclement of Germany and the misguided perception of the failure of Anglo-German détente, decided that German security depended on its alliance with Austria. Therefore Serbia's threat to Austria's existence became a more pressing concern in Berlin. Only decisive action against Serbia would secure Austria's great power position and in turn Germany's own future. Bethmann hoped that this could be achieved without a general European war, but if one was to occur, it was better sooner rather than later.

The July Crisis

The assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand occurred just days after the shift in Bethmann's thinking. The significance of the July crisis was that it coincided with decisions by Austria, Russia, and Germany to pursue a more assertive policy, with a view to winning a striking diplomatic victory even at the risk of a general European war. Each side hoped the other would retreat. Instead each decision provoked a radicalisation of the crisis. The restraints on war were thrown off and the bonds of peace proved inadequate. The Austrian ultimatum to Serbia was followed by a Russian decision to support her Balkan ally. Germany and Austria refused Grey's entreaties to consider a Concert of Europe solution. The Russian order to mobilise its army on 30 July led William II to order the mobilisation of German forces. In the German case, mobilisation meant the invasion of France, according to the Schlieffen Plan. Bethmann had to undertake a series of contorted diplomatic moves to justify the invasion of France, when the first threat had come from Tsarist Russia. By 1 August, Austria and Germany were at war against Russia and France. On 4 August Britain declared war on Germany. The moral justification lay in the German invasion of Belgium, but the geopolitical imperative to preserve the balance of power (a vague, but nonetheless important concept in British thinking) was the primary motivation. Italy managed to stay out of the conflict until spring 1915 before entering on the side of Britain, France, and Russia.

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The Causes of the War

By examining how peace was maintained for over four decades, the origins of the war become clearer. Public opinion was of minor importance as a determinant of policy during the July crisis and generally served to restrain governments from adopting aggressive policies. Economic considerations also favoured the maintenance of peace, while imperial rivalries outside Europe never threatened to lead to a general European war. The influence of the military in manipulating their governments into war has been much exaggerated. The crucial decisions from October 1913 were taken by civilian ministers, who had previously favoured peace, but were now willing to risk war in the pursuit of more assertive policies. The arms race had an important impact on German thinking, heightening fears of encirclement. Allies generally restrained each other, but by the eve of the July crisis the alliances had become much more rigid, while Russia would no longer be restrained by London and Paris. The great powers departed from the behaviour which had sustained peace because that peace now seemed to threaten their great power status and even their existence. For the first time in over four decades, at least for the small number of decision-makers in Vienna, St Petersburg, and Berlin, war was preferable to continuing losses. The system was in a severe crisis because these three powers felt they were losing and that defeat could only be prevented by more assertiveness and even war. It was a desperate miscalculation as those same three powers ended up losing the war.

Issues to Debate

- By what means was peace between the great powers maintained in Europe from 1871 to 1913?
- In what ways has knowledge of the conflict of 1914-18 distorted historians' understanding of the previous period of peace?
- Why were key leaders during the July Crisis willing to risk a major European war?

Further Reading

Holger Afflerbach and David Stevenson (eds), *An Improbable War? The outbreak of World War I and European political culture before 1914* (Berghahn, 2007)

James Joll, *The origins of the First World War* (3rd edition, updated by Gordon Martel, Longman, 2007)

Annika Mombauer, *The Origins of the First World War: Controversies and consensus* (Longman, 2002)

William Mulligan, *The Origins of the First World War* (Cambridge University Press, 2010)

William Mulligan is lecturer in modern history in the School of History & Archives at University College Dublin. His first book, *The Creation of the Modern German Army: General Walther Reinhardt and the Weimar Republic, 1914-1930* was published by Berghahn Books in 2005. His most recent book is *The Origins of the First World War*, published by Cambridge University Press in 2010.