

A LOST CHANCE*

We recently commemorated the start of the First World War. The war broke out on July 28, 1914, when German troops crossed the border and marched into Belgium and France. When the war ended four years later, nine million military combatants and six million civilians had died. This essay asks whether this war was inevitable. Could it have been avoided?

(1871) - When the Spanish throne became vacant in the year 1870, the Spanish Cortes selected the German Prince Leopold of the royal Hohenzollern family of Germany to fill the vacancy. This was unacceptable to France, and rising tensions eventually led it to declare war on Prussia. The two armies met on September 1 and 2, 1870, on the field at Sedan, and the French army of 100,000 men commanded by Emperor Louis Napoleon III surrendered.

That war became the Nineteenth Century's turning point. It disrupted the established order by enabling a group of weak and fragmented German states to grow into a powerful empire, upsetting the balance of power. The total collapse of France's vaunted army traumatized the French people, and insult was added to injury when the Kaiser was crowned in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles. Add to that Germany's annexation of the prized provinces of Alsace and Lorraine—a step demanded by the generals but opposed by Bismarck, who saw it as giving the French people a permanent grievance against Germany, and as creating a lasting enmity of these two countries that would lead to permanent instability.

France's bitter memories of the war kept its commitment to revenge alive. But France lacked the military strength to conduct a campaign against Germany; for that it needed a military alliance with a Big Power. The Austro-Hungarian Empire (Austria) (though in decline still an estimable actor on the European scene) was a possibility. But Russia would be a natural choice: a seemingly powerful nation with vast material and manpower resources and the capacity to conduct a two-front war. Though these two countries were highly diverse—culturally, politically and socially—relationships had long existed between them, and no inherent obstacles appeared to stand in the way of a Franco-Russo alliance. It was thus imperative for Germany's security that France be kept isolated, and responsibility for maintaining isolation fell on Germany's Chancellor, Otto von Bismarck.

Contrary to popular belief, Bismarck was no hawk; he believed that "any war, even a victorious one, was a misfortune." War was an instrument of his diplomacy, but only when limited to bringing about the unification of the German states. He was not looking for a new war with France. The newly created German Reich, in which he had a leading part, needed to be protected, and it was protection which his diplomacy sought. His aim was to remove the Big Powers' incentive to go to war, and his methods—such as his isolation policy—were innovative and sophisticated and not always understood by colleagues or opponents.

Critical to the success of the isolation policy was of course the position of Russia. A Franco-Russo alliance would confront Germany with the perennial spectre of a two-front war—and such an alliance had long been talked about by the military of the two countries. But would Russia turn away from a beneficial relationship resting on military and commercial, as well as familial foundations (through Queen Victoria)? To try to

understand this picture, we must take a backward look at the tangled web of Russian Foreign Policy.

(1877)- In the mid-nineteenth century, the Balkans were still ruled by the Ottoman empire, once one of the world's great empires, but now in decline under pressure from Western Europe's rapidly developing military, political and economic power. The clash of these civilizations was not confined to the Balkans but occurred in the Near East—where it was referred to as the “Eastern question”—and elsewhere. The focus of this essay is the Balkans and the constituent Ottoman states, in particular Turkey. Though impoverished, Turkey controlled much of strategic South—East Balkan territory. Judging the moment right to acquire long-desired access to the Dardanelles and Constantinople, and to free sacred Eastern Orthodox lands from Moslem occupation, Russia declared war on Turkey in April 1877.

After nearly two years of bitter warfare, Turkey was defeated. The parties' terms of peace were memorialized in the Treaty of San Stefano. That treaty gave Russia nearly all it had sought: much of Turkey's South-East Balkan territory and access to the Mediterranean. It would have made Russia the dominant power in the Balkans and was therefore unacceptable to the Great Powers, who in July 1878 convened the Congress of Berlin under Bismarck's chairmanship. Faced with a threat of war from the Powers, Russia canceled the Treaty of San Stefano, but received substantial compensation, including a measure of control of the newly created state of Bulgaria. No sooner did the Berlin treaty become public, however, than all hell broke loose among Russia's Nationalist and Pro Slav press and political elements, who charged that Russia's victory had been stolen from her. Bismarck, they charged, had led an anti-Russian campaign (though in fact he had lent quiet support to Russia's interests). (1879)

The issue now squarely before Bismarck was whether a foreign policy based on a stable and dependable relationship with Russia could be sustained. Russia's growing anti-German hostility posed the risk of a breakdown of the isolation policy and potentially of war. This led Bismarck to make two moves. His first was to enter into a Mutual Assistance Alliance with Austria (Dual Alliance). It promised unlimited support should either party be attacked by Russia, and it strengthened the isolation policy. Bismarck chose to have this treaty remain secret.

His second move was grounded on his belief that Russia feared Germany might change its foreign policy, leaving Russia isolated. This led Bismarck to convert the Austrian Dual Alliance into a three party arrangement. Negotiations took one and a half years, resulting in what came to be known as the League of Three Emperors (Drei Kaiser Bund). Signed in June 1881 by Germany, Austria and Russia, it was to run for a term of three years. It was renewed in 1884 and by its terms was renewable in 1887. Incorporating one of Bismarck's innovative ideas, this treaty provided security to each party by reciprocal promises of neutrality; each party promising that if it found itself at war with a fourth power, it would remain neutral. Most importantly, from the standpoint of Franco-Russian relations, it promised that in another Franco-German war, Russia would stand aside and remain neutral. Thus the effect of the treaty was to bar a Franco--Russo military alliance. (1878)

The efficacy of the League of Three Emperors treaty depended on the stability of the diplomatic terrain, and in particular, on the reliability of Russia as a treaty partner. Let us look back once more to the 1879 Congress of Berlin which had settled the Turkish war. Now, at a new session, the Great Powers took it upon themselves to bring order to the Balkans by creating new states. The largest was Bulgaria, encompass-

ing also Romelia, coveted by Russia as the gateway to the Mediterranean. The two states, while loosely tied to Russia, were intended to remain separate and independent. But in 1886 irredentist groups seized power and declared the countries unified and independent as Greater Bulgaria. Russia protested vigorously and sent an armed force into Bulgaria to regain control, but it failed embarrassingly. Russia was effectively kicked out of the country, probably with the tacit connivance of the Powers, leaving the Bulgarian affair an irritant in the Russo-German relationship and a cause for a loss of trust among them.

(1886) At this time Russia was ruled by Czar Alexander III. Born in 1845, he had only recently ascended the throne following the assassination of his brother Nikolay in 1881. He was conservative, a monarchist, and a firm supporter of Russian nationalism. He was also unsophisticated and vacillated. He had mixed feelings about Russia's friendly relations with Germany, and he shared public feelings of resentment, frustration and hostility toward Germany for being more successful, and toward Austria, hated on religious grounds. But he also accepted personal responsibility for his country's problems. About relations with France he was open minded.

This was the setting when the time arrived for the Czar's decision whether to renew the Three Emperors League treaty. Strenuous efforts to persuade him of their diverse views occupied the officials of his Foreign Office. Conservatives argued against continued submission to Germany; liberals valued the benefits of neutrality under the treaty. In the end, Alexander remained silent and the treaty lapsed.

(1887) On the German side, Bismarck was determined that the isolation must be maintained and he offered Russia an arrangement which would give the parties reciprocal neutrality benefits while freeing Russia

from entanglement with Austria. This was the illustrious Reinsurance Treaty. At its core it promised that Russia would remain neutral if France attacked Germany. Signed in June 1887, it was to run for three years. Alexander, while aware of the deterioration in the relations between the two countries, reluctantly signed.

In 1888 the game changed with the ascent of Wilhelm II to the German throne. He was bombastic and impetuous; Alexander disliked him intensely. In 1890 he dismissed Bismarck from his post. Concurrently he had received a request from Russia for renewal of the Reinsurance Treaty. Initially the Kaiser was disposed to grant the request but a group of Foreign Office officials dissuaded him, and within days of Bismarck's departure the German government refused to renew the treaty.

Why did the Kaiser let the Reinsurance Treaty lapse, abandoning the treaty relationship with Russia? Bismarck's successors advanced two arguments in their defense: one, that the Reinsurance Treaty was in conflict with the Austrian Alliance, a point Bismarck would have rejected out of hand as baseless; and two, that renewal would have revealed the existence of secret treaties, but in fact none of the parties would have had an incentive to do so. Finally it was argued that the Bismarckian treaty structure was too complex for anyone but Bismarck to manage. That perhaps comes closer to the truth—it brings to mind a picture of a pack of unruly circus animals, jostling, nipping, and baring their teeth as the ringmaster calls, soothing, petting, stroking, and snapping his whip to keep order in the ring.

Presumably no one knows the true reason for the Kaiser's refusal to renew the Treaty. On reflection, however, it does not appear entirely surprising. First, having just fired Bismarck, the Kaiser could be expected to resist operating his new administration under Bismarck's re-

gime. And, second, knowing him to be ignorant and arrogant, he would object to the restraints imposed by the Treaty.

END NOTE

This essay has addressed the origin of World War I. The War's origin is not to be confused with its causes. By way of (perhaps simplistic) analogy, consider a house; its origin lies in the owner's mind and the architect's plans; its causes in the builder's hands. So the causes of a dam's failure are the waters' pressures, not the mountains' springs and rivers where the waters originate.

The War's origin lies not in assassinations, broken treaties, or massed troops, much less in the political or economic policies of nations. These and other elements contribute to a causal chain. The origin is found in the irreducible drive to action. There can be no doubt that France's inescapable commitment to exact revenge from Germany was the origin of this war. That fact is not altered by the later material and human accretions to the fighting elements.

Bismarck's brilliant diplomacy created a treaty structure that isolated France. In his hands he held the lever to control France's access to power, the Reinsurance Treaty. It gave him the chance to block the course to war, if only briefly. When he was relieved of his post, the lever slipped from his hands and the chance was lost.

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