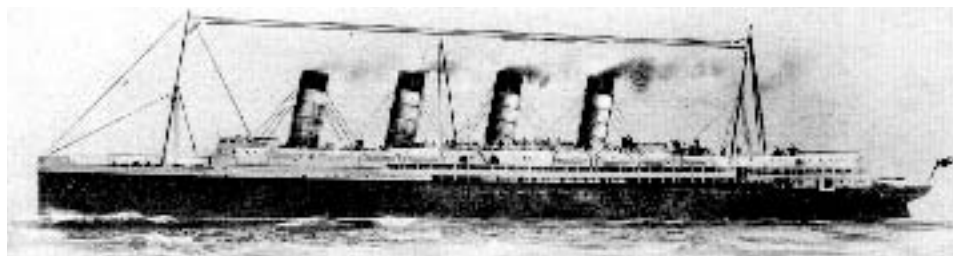




MILESTONES IN HISTORY

*The Grudges,
Neuroses and Mistakes
that Led to World War I*

By Eugene Finerman



the Lusitania

The end of one war is often the start of the next. In 1871 the Franco-Prussian War ended. The French and Germans had fought over a matter of vanity: Who had the better army? The Germans decisively proved that they did. After six months of heroic futility, France sued for peace. Otto von Bismarck, the chancellor of Germany, demanded that France cede two of its eastern provinces, Alsace and Lorraine. A vanquished France could not refuse such exacting terms but would never forgive them. The cornerstone of French foreign policy now would be revenge. But against the world's best army, France would need allies. It took some 20 years to find them.

Most of Europe did not fear Germany. The more immediate danger to peace was Russia. The czar's empire extended from Germany to the Pacific Ocean, had twice the population of any other European country and was intent on further expansion. As the self-anointed champion of the Slavic Peoples, Russia vowed to free Bulgaria, Macedonia and Bosnia, part of the Balkans, from Turkey. In 1877, after a short but bloody war, Russia nearly achieved its goal. The territories were liberated, or at least had changed from Turkish rule to Russian domination.

The other great powers of Europe—Britain, Austria-Hungary and Germany—were alarmed by the prospect of Russian control of the Balkans. Forming a united front in 1878, they forced Russia to surrender most of its gains. Bulgaria's independence was acknowledged, but Macedonia was returned to Turkey. Bosnia's final status was undecided but would be administered by Austria-Hungary.

Austria-Hungary should have refused. Another province seething with ethnic unrest was the last thing needed in an empire churning with contending nationalities. A half-dozen Slavic peoples—Czechs, Slovaks, Croatians, Slovenes, Ukrainians and Poles—lived within Austria-Hungary and they

all aspired to either self-rule or secession. With the addition of Bosnia, the dual monarchy now acquired the problem of Serbian nationalism. Russia encouraged the political agitation among its fellow Slavs. The cohesion of Austria-Hungary was fragile and, if it collapsed, Russia expected to acquire the Slavic fragments.

As a bulwark against Russian aggression, Austria-Hungary and Germany formed an alliance in 1879. The advantage for Austria-Hungary was obvious. Germany's army could intimidate even the Russian horde. For Germany, the alliance made a lasting friend of Austria-Hungary and created an understanding with Russia. Bismarck did not want to make any enemies—other than France. He personally pledged to Russia that the German-Austrian alliance was defensive in nature. Germany's power was meant to deter, not threaten.

This was Bismarck's policy, and it lasted as long as he did. For more than 20 years, the German chancellor and his emperor had a successful partnership: Kaiser Wilhelm reigned and Bismarck ruled. However, in 1888, the old kaiser died and the next Wilhelm—his grandson—was determined to rule for himself. The dismissed Bismarck thought that the success of his policies justified their continuation. The 29-year-old kaiser thought differently.

Wilhelm II ruled the richest, most powerful nation in Europe and he wanted Germany to have a commanding presence in the world. The new kaiser was boisterous, arrogant and rash, and new German foreign policy reflected his personality. He regarded Russia as a barbarian oaf that Germany could snub with impunity. As a further affront to Russia, Wilhelm began an alliance with the Ottoman Empire.

Confronted with this abrasive, threatening Germany, Russia now realized its need for an ally. Of course, France was more than eager; it loved the idea of Germany trapped and crushed between the two. Yet, such an alliance might have seemed impossible.



The two countries were the political opposites. In fact, it was illegal in Russia to play France's national anthem, "La Marseillaise." But the personality of Wilhelm II brought France and Russia together in 1892.

The kaiser also had a pathological jealousy of Britain. If his Germany was the greatest power in Europe, how could an island off Europe be the greatest power on Earth? Britain had the world's greatest navy; Germany had the world's best army. How could they even fight? Wilhelm thought of a way: the construction of a massive German navy. With its limited coastline, Germany did not need such a navy; but the kaiser's ego did. Britain could not ignore the rising challenge. By 1907, Britain had a pact with France and Russia.

READY TO FIGHT

Europe's grudges, ambitions and fears had blended into rival, glowering blocs. Germany, Austria and Ottoman Turkey formed one alliance; France, Russia and Britain opposed them. War was not inevitable, but everyone seemed eager for an excuse.

Serbia provided it. Allied to Russia, this small kingdom in the Balkans had a historic claim to the province of Bosnia. Hoping to incite a Bosnian uprising against Austria-Hungary,

Serbia sheltered and armed rebels. Terrorism made Bosnia dangerous but the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir to Austria-Hungary, would not be dissuaded from touring the province. On the morning of June 28, 1914, he and his wife survived one assassination attempt. That afternoon, they would not be so lucky. One gunman, Gavrilo Princip, killed them.

The Serbian government had no idea of the assassination plot but, by aiding terrorists, was still culpable. Austria-Hungary might have seemed perfectly justified in attacking Serbia, but the skein of alliances complicated the situation. A simple war between Austria-Hungary and Serbia was out of the question. Alliances had been formed; if one country went to war, they all went to war.

On July 28, Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia. The next day, Russia responded. By Aug. 4, Europe was at war. From St. Petersburg to London, the public seemed overjoyed. The coming war seemed like a glorious parade, and everyone wanted to march along.

Since the Franco-Russian pact of 1892, Germany's general staff had prepared for a two-front war. Named for its chief architect, the Schlieffen Plan was a timetable for conquest. In 1870-71, the Germans had defeated the French in six months.



Now, they planned to do it in six weeks. The Schlieffen strategy was to crush the French before the lumbering, under-developed Russia could train, supply and transport an army sufficient to attack Germany. To surprise and outflank the French, the plan's demanding schedule required Germany to invade Belgium. Britain guaranteed Belgium's sovereignty and would certainly go to war if Germany invaded. The Schlieffen Plan anticipated that, but also expected to win before a significant British army could be raised and transported to France.

Yet, for all its meticulous calculations, the Schlieffen Plan failed. With its command of the sea, Britain quickly transported 120,000 men to slow the German offensive. In the East, after only a month's preparation, the Russians launched an offensive and invaded Prussia. German troops had to be rushed to the Eastern Front. With unexpected obstacles and opposition, the sapped German offensive stalled. Both sides held their positions, digging in and creating a line of trenches that extended from Switzerland to the North Sea. A similar bloody stalemate developed on the Eastern Front.

Millions of men were sacrificed in a war of attrition. The tactics of war were reduced to a brutal choreography. One side would launch a full frontal assault against an array of machine guns. Then the other side would counter-attack using the same suicidal plan. And while Europe destroyed itself, America looked on.

Britain and France pleaded for help, and German brutality offered provocation for American intervention. In 1915, a German submarine sank the British ship *Lusitania*; of the 1,198 passengers who died; 128 were Americans. Yet, President Woodrow Wilson was not ready to bring America into the war. He faced a number of political obstacles. The country's many German-Americans were reluctant to see their new country fight their old one. Irish-Americans did not want to help Britain, the old enemy that was still occupying their

ancestral isle. Acceding to this isolationist sentiment, Wilson successfully campaigned for re-election in 1916 on the slogan "He Kept Us Out of War."

Beyond these political factors, the scholarly Wilson had a philosophical reason for America's neutrality. He would not join any alliance with czarist Russia. Russia was a tyranny, oppressing and persecuting its subjects. By contrast, Germany and Austria-Hungary were enlightened and liberal. While the czar reigned, America would stay neutral.

But the czar fell in March 1917. In place of the monarchy was a provisional government committed to the principles of democracy.

Wilson now could commit America to the war. On April 2, 1917, he asked Congress for a declaration of war against Germany and its allies. The president proclaimed that the mission of this war was "to make the world safe for democracy." Ironically, Russia would soon be a tyranny again. Its liberal government was overthrown by the Communists in November 1917. The war had toppled the czar; and it toppled the provisional government. The Communists gained a following by their promise to withdraw Russia from the war.

Signing a treaty with the Communists, Germany had won on the Eastern Front; but it was too late to win the war. The first wave of a 2-million-man American Army broke the German resistance in 1918. In the Mideast, Allied victories had reduced the Ottoman Empire to the borders of Turkey. After four years of war, Austria-Hungary was disintegrating into ethnic fragments. The war was over.

Nine million men were dead and no one had really won. The victors were as demoralized as the defeated. The surviving countries were either enfeebled by loss or poisoned with rage. Contrary to Wilson's goals, the world had been made safe for Stalin and Hitler.

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