



The Breakdown of the International System from 1890

This is a transcript of the [Breakdown of the International System from 1890](https://www.mrallsophistory.com/podcast/breakdown-of-the-international-system-from-1890) podcast from www.mrallsophistory.com

The central themes discussed in this podcast can be used to consider the long-term causes of the First World War. I'll make reference to issues that could be classed as militarism, the alliance system, imperialism and nationalism – each of which became central issues in Europe at this time, and provide you with a good thematic framework around which to structure an answer to a question on this topic. This podcast can also be used to help you answer a question on Germany from 1871. The policies of Germany under Wilhelm II outlined here could be compared and contrasted with those of Bismarck discussed in my previous podcast. You can download that podcast from my website at www.mrallsophistory.com

In the last podcast we looked at how 1871 was a watershed year for Europe, since it was the start of a new era of international politics within which Germany had a significant role under Bismarck. 1890 saw another seismic shift. A new Kaiser – Wilhelm II – had come to the throne in Germany, and he held very different views to the old Chancellor. So different were these views that Bismarck resigned from his role as Chancellor, bringing about a new approach to foreign policy in what is known as the Wilhelmine period.

Whereas Bismarck had worked hard to maintain a European balance of power and shunned colonial expansion, the new Kaiser and his advisers believed that Germany could only develop by pursuing an overseas empire. Wilhelm's new government therefore developed Weltpolitik or 'global policy' that risked bringing Germany into direct conflict with Britain, France and the other colonial powers. Wilhelm quite famously claimed that he was seeking his rightful 'place in the sun' since Germany was now a strong nation on par with the established European powers. Germany's imperial actions from 1890 consequently had the effect of alienating all the major powers. To foreign nations, Germany appeared to be seeking opportunities to expand at any cost.

The problem for Germany was that Weltpolitik relied on a series of assumptions that turned out to be dangerously incorrect. Firstly, Wilhelm's government believed that France and Russia would never become allies. Secondly, Germany held the view that Russia and Britain would never be able to settle their colonial disputes in Asia. Thirdly – and possibly most dangerously – they believed that Weltpolitik meant the other countries needed Germany as an ally more than Germany needed them. Fatally for Germany, all these assumptions revealed themselves to be incorrect.

One of the first problems to emerge after 1890 was with Russia. You should remember that Bismarck had worked hard to ensure that Russia was never in a position to ally itself with France, and had signed a number of treaties that Bismarck hoped would avoid problems



emerging in the Balkans. The first sign of trouble came in 1890 when Germany refused to renew the Reinsurance Treaty with Russia. Despite a number of attempts by Russia to try to convince Germany to renew the Treaty between 1890 and 1894, the Kaiser continuously refused. Russia relied on German financial aid to fund its ambitious program of industrialization, yet Wilhelm believed that Russia would go along with German policies even without the agreements in place. However, after four years of repeated attempts to renew the treaty, Russia realized that Germany was not going to change its stance. Instead, Russia turned to France. Germany had barely considered the possibility that the Tsar could turn to a Republic for assistance, but the 1894 Franco-Russian Treaty raised the dark threat of Germany being caught in a two-front war. With Russia and France now part of a military alliance, Germany threw its full support behind Austria in the increasingly unstable Balkans, which will be discussed in a separate podcast. Subscribe to my podcasts at www.mrallsophistory.com or join my page on Facebook to receive updates.

Meanwhile, German adherence to Weltpolitik caused increased tensions with Britain. While Bismarck had little interest in either an empire or a navy, Wilhelm wanted both. As Germany gained colonies, it became necessary to expand the size of the navy as well. Admiral Tirpitz, in the late 1890s, referred to this as his 'risk fleet' theory and said that the German navy needed to be large enough to deter any challenge to German colonies or trading interests from Britain. Consequently, 1898 and 1900 saw Germany begin a large naval construction program. It wasn't long before Germany announced that it planned to build Dreadnought battleships, the newest and most powerful type of ship at the time, after Britain began their construction in 1906. Seeing German construction plans as a threat to their naval superiority, Britain pleaded with Germany to cancel its plans but Germany refused.

A few years later Winston Churchill, when he was First Lord of the Admiralty, explained Britain's concerns over Germany developing its navy. He argued that since Britain was an island nation a strong navy was a 'necessity' whereas for Germany it was a 'luxury'. Kaiser Wilhelm, meanwhile, stuck to his view that Germany was well within its rights to develop its naval power. In an interview with the Daily Telegraph in 1908, as well as saying the English were, "mad, mad, mad as March hares", he asserted that "Germany is a young and growing empire. She has a worldwide commerce which is rapidly expanding...Germany must have a powerful fleet to protect that commerce." Wilhelm's attitude, however, was not unique to Germany. Nationalism and patriotism were central themes in the popular press of the European powers at the time, and drew on an education system that taught the glorious history of the nation, and served to prepare the public for future wars in which national pride could be secured. Threatened by Germany naval expansion, Britain now had to secure its own national pride so abandoned its isolationist policy and signed the Entente Cordial with France.



The emerging alliance situation was perfect for France. Under Bismarck, Germany had worked hard to ensure that France was isolated from other European nations. However, the military alliance with Russia in 1894 – and France’s growing financial involvement there – had broken French isolation in Europe. France’s security was further strengthened by the 1906 Entente Cordial. This arguably came about as a result of growing tensions between Germany and France in North Africa where the Moroccan Crisis of 1905 saw both Britain and Russia side with France against Germany. Furthermore, in 1907 Britain and Russia – fresh from its defeat by Japan – signed the Anglo-Russian Entente. Although on the surface it was an agreement to regulate their areas of control within Asia, the British Foreign Minister saw the agreement as a weapon against the domination of Europe by Germany. When combined with the Anglo-French Entente and the Franco-Russian Alliance, it meant that all three countries had mutual agreements. Consequently Germany was now surrounded by hostile powers and was no longer able to exploit the rivalries of others. The Triple Entente was born and acted as a powerful bloc that offset the Triple alliance of Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy. This is evident from the Second Moroccan Crisis of 1911. When Germany sent the gunboat, “The Panther” to Agadir in opposition to French troops landing in Morocco, the French were prepared to negotiate a deal. Britain was not. Fearing that Germany was seeking to establish a naval base David Lloyd George, in his famous Mansion House speech on 21 July, issued a firm warning that Britain would prefer to go to war with Germany rather than lose its honour. At this, Germany backed down.

Ever since Russia and France signed their military alliance in 1894, Germany had become increasingly aware of the prospect of a two-front war. In response, the German General Staff adopted a strategy to ensure they could fight both France and Russia. The Chief of Staff, Count Alfred Von Schlieffen, developed the plan that took his name – the Schlieffen Plan – and this was adopted in 1905 as the official military strategy. The Schlieffen Plan was developed from the lessons of the Franco-Prussian War in 1870-71. In this instance, Prussia gained the advantage by mobilizing quickly. Schlieffen again focused on Germany mobilizing quickly in order to hurl its forces against France before either France or Russia had time to attack Germany. This lightning blow would defeat France within six weeks, as a result of invading them through the ‘back door’ of Belgium while a smaller German force distracted the French army on the German-French border. Having captured France, the German army would then be transported across Europe to face the Russians, whom Schlieffen gambled would take at least 12 weeks to mobilise.

It’s important to remember, though, that other nations had their own war plans as well. France’s Plan 17, like the Schlieffen Plan, was built on the need for swift mobilization. In order to take advantage of the speed of mobilization, the plan called for a direct invasion of the border territories of Alsace and Lorraine before crossing the Rhine, rather than launching an elaborate attack through a neutral neighbor as in the Schlieffen Plan. Austria-Hungary had plans that centred on fighting Serbia and Russia, while Russia had a plan to attack Austria-



Hungary and Germany. The net result was that by 1914, as well as being divided into two powerful alliances: the Triple Alliance of Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy, and the Triple Entente of France, Great Britain, and Russia, each of these countries had war plans in place. The alliances held the European powers in a web, whereby the actions of one could impact on the others. As the alliances hardened, an arms race intensified, and tension mounted. The amount of money spent on the military increased by 300 per cent between 1870 and 1914 – all countries were developing large standing armies and caches of weapons. Europe was like a powder keg waiting for a spark to ignite it.