

Imperialism, militarism, patriotism and an inescapable system of alliances made the avoidance of war difficult for talented statesmen. Unfortunately, the power in Europe rested in the arms of people who lacked the intellectual aptitude to halt the progress to war – even if they had wished to. The resulting death and destruction were entirely avoidable but some of those who headed their respective nations failed to appreciate the situation and failed to act to save the day.

Kaiser Wilhelm, the King of Germany, fell out with the man who had, under his father, united Germany – Otto von Bismarck. Bismarck was a statesman in every sense of the word. He had engineered, through a series of wars and diplomatic moves, the unification of the greater Germany, declaring the completion of the Second Reich in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles on the 9th January 1871. This did have the effect of causing much resentment in France as his completion of the Second Reich involved the confiscation of the provinces of Alsace and Lorraine from the French following their defeat in the Franco-Prussian War. Having lost the services of Bismarck, Wilhelm had followed a path of assertive diplomacy known as Weltpolitik which led in turn to German isolation.

Kaiser Wilhelm was not really up to the job when it came to assertive democracy as he and his ministers tried to follow two basic ideas. Firstly, that Germany could match Britain's naval power, and in doing so, could wield more influence in world affairs. This had two effects that were directly related to the build up of tensions that led to the outbreak of war. These were that the British were not going to stand idly by and let the Germans beat them; they started increasing the size of their navy as well. Secondly, when Germany tried to influence imperial matters in Algiers and Agadir, this had the effect of pushing France, Great Britain and Russia from being an Entente Cordiale into a Triple Entente which then started resembling an alliance more and more with each passing crisis.

Kaiser Wilhelm's role in the start of the war has been far from exhausted and reference will be made to his role in the July Crisis later. For now, and to understand why Europe plunged itself into war in 1914, it is necessary to examine the role of two other events: the Treaty of London (1839) and the composing of the Schlieffen Plan (1905).

Following the formation of Belgium, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland stated that Belgian neutrality would be guaranteed. It was also guaranteed by the Tsar of Russia, King of the French, the king of Prussia, the king of the Netherlands, the King of Austria and the King of Hungary and Bohemia. This guarantee was laid out following the Congress of London and was signed on the 19th April 1839 and named the Treaty of London. It was the breaking of this treaty that General Sir John French cited in his justification to order the British Expeditionary Force to attack the forces of Germany on Tuesday 4th August 1914.

So, what caused the British to attack German forces in August 1914? In 1905, German strategists were trying to work out how to win a war on two fronts. If you remember, Russia, France and Great Britain were in an alliance which was becoming stronger because of Germany's desire to increase its influence. Obviously, Russia and France are on opposing sides of Germany and so caused a great worry for the Germans. Basically, the Schlieffen Plan aimed to invade France and capture Paris within two months of the start of hostilities. The Germans believed it would take three or four months for the Russians to mobilise their forces and Germany could only really cope with war on one front at a time. This meant that time was of the essence. Following the Franco Prussian War of 1870-1, France built up military resources in the area between Belgium and Switzerland that bordered Germany. The plan was to send a light force of German troops into France directly, but a much larger force through the neutral countries of Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands into France. They would then defeat the French within two months and then Germany could turn to face Russia.

It was believed that Russia would take a long time to mobilise itself. The Schlieffen Plan involved Germany having to move swiftly if there was likely to be a war in Europe.

Many Germans objected to this plan as they thought, quite rightly, that it would escalate the war in Europe but they were silenced. So Germany was sitting on a plan that would involve a pre-emptive strike to have any possibility of success. This is a recipe for disaster as it created what AJP Taylor called a, "Timetable to war."

Imagine the picture: tensions are building up all over Europe. Statemen are sadly lacking in every country and the European Powers are plagued by crisis after crisis, caused, in part by Wilhelm's Weltpolitik and his efforts to gain imperial and naval power. Then out of the blue, in a town called Sarajevo, a shot rang out...

The shot was fired by Gavrillo Princip, a Serbian nationalist who was a member of a group called the Black Hand Gang. Serbia, at this time, was ruled by Austria Hungary and was part of what was called the Hapsburg Empire. The Black Hand Gang wanted to be independent of Austria Hungary and so they decided to shoot the Archduke Franz Ferdinand. They killed him. He the was the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne. This enraged the Austrians.

As you can imagine, Austria's response was swift and strong. It needn't have been though. The Hungarian Prime Minister, Istvan Tiszar pleaded for restraint as he could see how the system of alliances could quickly escalate any situation to a catastrophic one. His pleas were mainly ignored by the Foreign Secretary Berchtold, who dispatched Count Hoyos to Germany to get Kaiser Wilhelm's support for military action. Despite some misgivings, the Kaiser gave Germany's guarantee that they would support Austria and, on the 23rd July, Austria issued an ultimatum to Serbia. The ultimatum was designed to be provocative and it was expected that the Serbs would reject it. The Serbs, fearing a war against the Austro-Hungarian Empire, accepted all but two points in the ultimatum. The Austrians cut diplomatic relations and started mobilising their army.

On the 24th, Russia recalled all its troops ready for mobilisation. They stated that Serbia would not be allowed to fall to Austrian aggression.

A wise statesman would have issued advice to his King that it was time to stop and take stock of the situation. Instead, Berchtold feared that an international intervention would stop the war and so declared war on Serbia on the 28th. Shots were fired in Belgrade (the Serb capital) and the war began.

Germany, fearful of missing its opportunity to stop a war on two fronts, enacted the Schlieffen Plan. on the night of August 3rd to 4th, Germany mobilised its army and sent them through Belgium. Britain had guaranteed Belgium's neutrality and so was obligated to declare war on Germany. This happened on Tuesday 4th August 1914.

At many points throughout this series of events, the Statesmen of Europe could have stopped to consider the consequences of their actions. Kaiser Wilhelm's obsession with catching up with Britain and France in terms of Imperial and naval power. The work that Berchtold undertook to force a war with Serbia could have been avoided by patience and the surety that, because of the complex system of alliances, treaties and entents, war would be guaranteed in Europe if he went ahead. But ahead, he steamed and he was joined by a European population that sensed the adventure of war and wanted join in before it was all over by Christmas.

Eight and a half million soldiers and some thirteen million civilians paid the price.