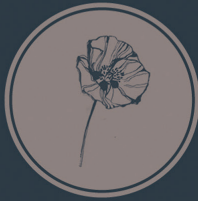


THE
CONNELL GUIDE
TO



WORLD WAR
ONE

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JULIAN FELLOWES

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW
IN ONE CONCISE VOLUME

by Max Egremont

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Introduction

In its slaughter and consequences, the First World War was the most catastrophic event in 20th century European history.

For many, before 1914, a huge European war had seemed impossible. Conflicts in the Balkans flared up yet stayed contained. The Belgian historian Henri Pirenne wrote to a friend in December 1905: “Do you really believe in the possibility of a war? For me it is impossible to have the least fear in that regard.” In March 1912, the British peer Lord Esher – an authority on defence matters – told an audience of Britain’s senior Generals that war “becomes every day more difficult and improbable”. After all, what could be gained by war? In 1909, the British writer Norman Angell claimed that with the increasing interdependence of nations war could not benefit the victor. All participating countries would be impoverished; the idea of victory was a “great illusion”.

The European powers before 1914 can be caricatured: detached and complacent Britain, resentful and fearful France, militaristic or Prussian Germany, collapsing Austria-Hungary, a sick Ottoman Empire, mysterious and gigantic Russia, unreliable Italy. The rulers take on identities: “Edward the Peacemaker”, the mad Emperor of Germany, the feeble Tsar of Russia, the isolated Sultan, the old and tragic Franz Joseph (ruler of the vast Hapsburg domains), the frock-coated

succession of French Presidents with their concealing beards.

This sense of a puppet theatre misses the possible choices. The historian Dominic Lieven writes that in July and August 1914, “fewer than fifty individuals, all of them men, made the decisions that took their countries to war”. Negotiations took place in gatherings of diplomats and politicians who not only changed their minds but were constantly changing as well. In France, there were 16 changes of foreign minister between 1906 and 1914.

In this short guide we examine controversies which have raged over the years. What caused the war? Who should be blamed for its outbreak? Should Britain have joined in and, after it did, were its soldiers really, as has been claimed, “lions led by donkeys”? What was America’s role? At the end, we look at the final peace settlement. Was this as fair and sensible as possible in the circumstances or, by humiliating Germany, did the Allies pave the way to a Second World War, a truly global conflict which turned out to be even bloodier and more destructive than the First?

The causes of war

Why was the rise of Germany so dangerous?

The outbreak of World War One has been called the most complex series of happenings in history and historians will always argue about what caused it.

No one, however, disputes the importance of the unification of Germany in 1871. Prussia's complete defeat of France ended with Napoleon III, a descendant of Bonaparte, going into exile and the newly united Germany (amalgamating dozens of German-speaking populations and mini-states into one country) emerging as the dominant power in continental Europe. The King of Prussia, Wilhelm I, became the Kaiser – the Emperor – of Germany, while Otto von Bismarck became its first Chancellor.

The emergence of a powerful new country in the middle of Europe had a hugely destabilising effect. Alarm bells rang in London, where the British Prime Minister, Benjamin Disraeli, told the House of Commons that what had happened represented “a German revolution, a greater event than the French revolution of the last century”. The balance of power, he said, had “been entirely destroyed, and the country which suffers most, and feels the effects of this great change most, is England”.

In fact the “Iron Chancellor”, Bismarck – architect of the new Germany – did not want war with England. He wished for no more wars, for his

victories over Denmark, the Austro-Hungarian Empire and France had given him what he wanted. He reluctantly agreed to Prussia's annexation of Alsace and Lorraine in France, suspecting, rightly, that it would cause simmering resentment. He saw the vulnerability of a new Germany surrounded by hostile nations and, to safeguard her eastern border, arranged a treaty with Russia in 1887, each power promising to remain neutral towards the other. He showed great diplomatic skill in keeping France isolated, while reassuring Britain that the new German empire would not be a threat to her security or empire.

But Bismarck's system depended on one man: Bismarck. He had an acquiescent master in Kaiser Wilhelm I and an iron control of parliament. In the new German constitution, foreign policy, defence and the choice of ministers stayed in the hands of the crown.

The situation changed with the accession of Kaiser Wilhelm II to the throne in 1888. A grandson of Queen Victoria, the new Kaiser was autocratic and emotionally unstable. Lord Salisbury, by now British prime minister, wondered if he was “all there”. Wilhelm II, unlike his predecessor, wanted to rule as well as reign. He dismissed Bismarck in 1890, turned his ministers into little more than messengers, or functionaries, and rapidly proved, “as the loosest of cannons, that he was not up to the job”.*

* Gary Sheffield, *A Short History of World War One*, p4

While Bismarck had been content merely to preserve the new German empire, the new Kaiser was not so easily satisfied. He embodied, in the view of the eminent historian, Professor Sir Michael Howard, three qualities that can be said to have characterised the then ruling elite: “archaic militarism, vaulting ambition, and neurotic insecurity”.*

Germany, like Prussia before her, was a militaristic culture. “It became good form even for the higher state officials to wear military uniform at every conceivably fitting occasion,” notes Gerhard Ritter. The philosopher Heinrich von Treitschke, a bitter enemy of the British Empire, declared that Prussia’s greatness had come about through war. In Treitschke’s lectures in Berlin, attended by the future Field Marshal Hindenburg and the future Admiral Tirpitz, Darwin’s theory of “natural selection” was applied to nations. “Weak and cowardly peoples go to the wall,” Treitschke said, “and rightly so. In this everlasting contest of different states lies the beauty of History and to wish to abolish this conflict is sheer nonsense.” War was vital “as a terrible medicine for mankind”; peace a dream of “weary, dispirited and worn-out ears”.

On its own, the Kaiser’s militarism might have been merely absurd, with the constant parades and endless celebrations of victories, but it was made dangerous by his ambition. Certainly many of

* Michael Howard, *A Very Short Introduction to the First World War*; p9

his contemporaries, including several European statesmen, thought him mildly unhinged. Christopher Clark writes:

He was an extreme exemplar of that Edwardian social category, the club bore who is forever explaining some pet project to the man in the next chair. Small wonder that being button-holed by the Kaiser over lunch or dinner, when escape



GERMAN MILITARISM

Fritz Stern calls pre-1914 Germany “a thoroughly militaristic country”. Bethmann Hollweg, in his first appearance at the Reichstag as Chancellor in 1909, wore a major’s uniform. “Only the person who could wear the uniform with the silver epaulettes counted as a real man,” says Gerhard Ritter. The Kaiser much preferred the company of soldiers to diplomats and politicians.

A cult of honour and physical courage existed in Germany long before 1914. It is widely accepted to have been the most militarised country in

Europe, even if by one measure – the proportion of the population under arms – France was in the lead, with 2.29 per cent in the army and navy compared to Germany’s 1.33 per cent. In Germany, the spirit of the Enlightenment – the emphasis on rationalism and the intellect – was much weaker, even despised. Philosophers such as Fichte and Nietzsche, and Wagner, the composer, turned from rationalism to feeling, mystery and an admiration for power.

Duelling was still acceptable in both Germany and France. In German universities, the deep scars etched on to cheeks in fencing matches were badges of honour. Clemenceau, wartime Prime Minister of France, fought several duels. ■

was impossible, struck fear into the hearts of so many European royals.*

Winston Churchill, a guest at German military manoeuvres before the war, admired Wilhelm's "undeniable cleverness" but worried about his inadequate temperament. All Europe's monarchs were "wild cards in the doom game played out in 1914", says Max Hastings, "but Wilhelm was the wildest of all".**

So Bismarck's legacy to his country ended up as a dysfunctional political system in which the will of the German people (expressed through the liberal-minded *Reichstag*, their parliament), was trumped by the powers of the Emperor, his appointed ministers and the army's chief of staff. Jonathan Steinberg writes:

Bismarck... left a system which only he – a very abnormal person – could govern and then only if he had as superior a normal Kaiser. [Thereafter] neither condition obtained, and the system slithered into the sycophancy, intrigue and bluster that made the Kaiser's Germany a danger to its neighbours.***

Germany's right-wing leadership now began to claim for Germany the status of a World Power, or

* Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers*, p182

** Max Hastings, *Catastrophe*, p6

*** Jonathan Steinberg, *Bismarck: A Life*, p458



Wilhelm II, the last German Emperor (Kaiser)

Weltmacht. This led to a World Policy, or *Welt-politik*, aimed at expanding Berlin's influence. The Reinsurance Treaty between Germany and Russia, arranged by Bismarck, was allowed to lapse – in hindsight, a critical error. Russia edged closer to France; by 1894 the two countries were formally in alliance. "That young man [the Kaiser] wants war with Russia," Bismarck told an aide before his dismissal, "and would like to draw his sword straight away if he could."*

Viewed from Moscow or Paris, the alliance between the French and the Russians was a sensible precaution, given Germany's alliance with Austria-Hungary. But viewed from Berlin, as tensions grew

* John Rohl, *Young Wilhelm: The Kaiser's Early Life*, p813

in the early years of the 20th century, and Britain emerged as a possible third partner, the amity between France and Russia came to seem much more threatening. So the power blocks of 1914 formed, amidst growing German anxiety about encirclement: France to the west, Russia to the east, Britain at sea.

Meanwhile, the new country was taking off. Between 1871 and 1914 Germany's growth was staggering. Its population rose from 40 million to 65 million and its achievements were extraordinary. "In 1914, Berlin was the Athens of the world," says Norman Stone, "a place where you went to learn anything important – physics, philosophy, music, engineering..."

Three members of the British cabinet which went to war in 1914 had studied at German universities. One of these, the war minister, Lord Haldane, described Germany in 1912 as "already one of the greatest nations in the world in virtue of character and intellectual endowment". German chemists and engineers were noted for their ingenuity, and Germany and its allies came close to victory in the Italian mountains because Ferdinand Porsche invented the four-wheel drive to deal with them (before going on to invent Volkswagen and much else). Industry boomed. "In 1914 the great smokestacks of the Ruhr predominated, as once those of... Manchester had done."**

* Norman Stone, *A Short World War One History*, p7

** Stone, p8

What was the effect of the Kaiser's plan for a powerful navy?

The confidence of the Germans grew – and success went to their heads. Bismarck had always been cautious, worrying about Germany's potential isolation. The Kaiser, however, had no such doubts. His "model" was rich Britain with her huge empire and powerful navy.* Why shouldn't Germany match this? Although overjoyed when, shortly after his accession, his grandmother Queen Victoria made him an honorary British admiral, the Kaiser was jealous of British imperial self-confidence. He urged his military advisers to read Alfred Mahan's book, *The Influence of Sea power upon History*, and spent hours drawing sketches of ships he thought should be built.

Having allowed her alliance with Russia to slip, and with France and Russia now allies, the last thing that Germany needed was a problem with Britain. Norman Stone believes "the greatest mistake of the twentieth century was made when Germany built a navy designed to attack her".** The decision to create a fleet capable of challenging the Royal Navy and to reject the continental balance of power, the cornerstone of British foreign policy, put Berlin on an increasingly dangerous path. It was very much

* "I adore England," the Kaiser told Theodore Roosevelt. He corresponded in fluent English and read P.G. Wodehouse aloud to his inner circle, laughing uproariously.

** Stone p11