CHAPTER EIGHT

Into the Vortex: The Military Doomsday Machine

The astonishing aspect of the outbreak of the First World War is not that a crisis simpler than many already surmounted had finally triggered a global catastrophe, but that it took so long for it to happen. By 1914, the confrontation between Germany and Austria-Hungary on the one side, and the Triple Entente on the other, had turned deadly earnest. The statesmen of all the major countries had helped to construct the diplomatic doomsday mechanism that made each succeeding crisis progressively more difficult to solve. Their military chiefs had vastly compounded the peril by adding strategic plans which compressed the time available for decision-making. Since the military plans depended on speed and the diplomatic machinery was geared to its traditional leisurely pace, it became impossible to disentangle the crisis under intense time pressure. To make matters worse, the military planners had not adequately explained the implications of their handiwork to their political colleagues.

Military planning had, in effect, become autonomous. The first step in this direction occurred during the negotiation for a Franco-Russian military alliance in 1892. Up to that time, alliance negotiations had been about the *casus belli,* or what specific actions by the adversary might oblige allies to go to war. Almost invariably, its definition hinged on who was perceived to have initiated the hostilities.

In May 1892, the Russian negotiator, Adjutant General Nikolai Obruchev, sent a letter to his Foreign Minister, Giers, explaining why the traditional method for defining the *casus belli* had been overtaken by modern technology. Obruchev argued that what mattered was who mobilized first, not who fired the first shot: "The undertaking of mobilization can no longer be considered as a peaceful act; on the contrary, it represents the most decisive act of war."[1]

The side that procrastinated in mobilizing would lose the benefit of its alliances and enable its enemy to defeat each adversary in turn. The need for all the allies to mobilize simultaneously had become so urgent in the minds of European leaders that it turned into the keystone of solemn diplomatic engagements. The purpose of alliances was no longer to guarantee support *after* a war had started, but to guarantee that each ally would mobilize as soon as and, it was hoped, just before, any adversary did. When alliances so constructed confronted each other, threats based on mobilization became irreversible because stopping mobilization in midstream was more disastrous than not having started it at all. If one side stopped while the other proceeded, it would be at a growing disadvantage with every passing day. If both sides tried to stop simultaneously, it would be technically so difficult that almost certainly the mobilization would be completed before the diplomats could agree on how to arrest it.

This doomsday procedure effectively removed the *casus belli* from political control. Every crisis had a built-in escalator to war—the decision to mobilize—and every war was certain to become general.

Far from deploring the prospect of automatic escalation, Obruchev welcomed it enthusiastically. The last thing he wanted was a local conflict. For, if Germany were to stay out of a war between Russia and Austria, it would simply emerge afterward in a position to dictate the terms of the peace. In Obruchev's fantasy, this was what Bismarck had done at the Congress of Berlin:

> Less than any other can our diplomacy count on an isolated conflict of Russia, for example, with Germany, or Austria, or Turkey alone. The Congress of Berlin was lesson enough for us in this connection, and it

> taught us whom we should regard as our most dangerous enemy—the one who fights with us directly or the one who waits for our weakening and then dictates the terms of peace? . . .[2]

According to Obruchev, it was in Russia's interest to make certain that every war would be general. The benefit to Russia of a well-constructed alliance with France would be to prevent the possibility of a localized war:

> At the outset of every European war there is always a great temptation for the diplomats to localize the conflict and to limit its effects as far as possible. But in the present armed and agitated condition of continental Europe, Russia must regard any such localization of the war with particular skepticism, because this could unduly strengthen the possibilities not only for those of our enemies who are hesitating and have not come out into the open, but also for vacillating allies.[3]

In other words, a defensive war for limited objectives was *against* Russia's national interest. Any war had to be total, and the military planners could grant no other option to the political leaders:

> Once we have been drawn into a war, we cannot conduct that war otherwise than with all our forces, and against both our neighbors. In the face of the readiness of entire armed peoples to go to war, no other sort of war can be envisaged than the most decisive sort—a war that would determine for long into the future the relative political positions of the European powers, and especially of Russia and Germany.[4]

However trivial the cause, war would be total; if its prelude involved only one neighbor, Russia should see to it that the other was drawn in. Almost grotesquely, the Russian general staff *preferred* to fight Germany and Austria-Hungary jointly than just one of them. A military convention carrying out Obruchev's ideas was signed on January 4, 1894. France and Russia agreed to mobilize together should *any* member of the Triple Alliance mobilize for *any* reason whatsoever. The doomsday machine was complete. Should Germany's ally, Italy, mobilize against France over Savoy, for instance, Russia would have to mobilize against Germany; if Austria mobilized against Serbia, France was now obliged to mobilize against Germany. Since it was virtually certain that at some point some nation would mobilize for some cause, it was only a matter of time before a general war broke out, for it required only *one* mobilization by a major power to start the doomsday machinery for all of them.

At least Tsar Alexander III understood that the game now being played was for the highest stakes. When Giers asked him, "... what would we gain by helping the French destroy Germany?" he replied: "What we would gain would be that Germany, as such, would disappear. It would break up into a number of small, weak states, the way it used to be."[5] German war aims were equally sweeping and nebulous. The much-invoked European equilibrium had turned into a battle to the death, though not one of the statesmen involved could have explained what cause justified such nihilism or what political aims would be served by the conflagration.

What Russian planners were putting forward as theory, the German general staff translated into operational planning at almost the exact moment that Obruchev was negotiating the Franco-Russian military alliance. And with German thoroughness, the imperial generals pushed the mobilization concept to its absolute extreme. The chief of the German staff, Alfred von Schlieffen, was as obsessed by mobilization schedules as his Russian and French counterparts. But whereas the Franco-Russian military leaders were concerned with defining the obligation to mobilize, Schlieffen focused on implementing the concept.

Refusing to leave anything to the vagaries of the political environment, Schlieffen tried to devise a foolproof plan for escaping Germany's dreaded encirclement. Just as Bismarck's successors had abandoned his complex diplomacy, so Schlieffen jettisoned the strategic concepts of Helmuth von Moltke, the military architect of Bismarck's three rapid victories between 1864 and 1870.

Moltke had devised a strategy that left open the option of a political solution to Bismarck's nightmare of hostile coalitions. In case of a two-front war, Moltke planned to split the German army more or less evenly between the East and the West, and to go on the defensive on both fronts. Since France's principal objective was to regain Alsace-Lorraine, it was certain to attack. If Germany defeated that offensive, France would be obliged to consider a compromise peace. Moltke specifically warned against extending military operations to Paris, having learned in the Franco-Prussian War how difficult it was to conclude a peace while besieging the enemy's capital.

Moltke proposed the same strategy for the Eastern front—namely, to defeat a Russian attack and to follow it by pushing the Russian army back to a strategically significant distance, and then to offer a compromise peace. Whichever forces first achieved victory would be available to aid the armies on the other front. In this manner, the scale of the war, the sacrifices, and the political solution would be kept in some sort of balance.[6]

But just as Bismarck's successors had been uncomfortable with the ambiguities of his overlapping alliances, so Schlieffen rejected Moltke's plan because it left the military initiative to Germany's enemies. Nor did Schlieffen approve of Moltke's preference for political compromise over total victory. Determined to impose terms which were, in effect, unconditional surrender, Schlieffen elaborated a scheme for a quick and decisive victory on one front and then throwing all of Germany's forces against the other adversary, thereby achieving a clear-cut outcome on both fronts. Because a quick, knockout blow in the East was precluded by the slow pace of Russian mobilization, which was expected to take six weeks, and by Russia's vast territory, Schlieffen decided to destroy the French army first, before the Russian army was fully mobilized. To circumvent the heavy French fortifications at the German border, Schlieffen came up with the idea of violating Belgian neutrality by wheeling the German army through its territory. He would capture Paris and trap the French army from the rear in its fortresses along the border. In the meantime, Germany would stay on the defensive in the East.

The plan was as brilliant as it was reckless. A minimum knowledge of history would have revealed that Great Britain would surely go to war if Belgium was invaded—a fact which seems to have totally eluded the Kaiser and the German general staff. For twenty years after the Schlieffen Plan was devised in 1892, Germany's leaders had made innumerable proposals to Great Britain to gain its support—or at least neutrality—in a European war, all of which were rendered illusory by German military planning. There was no cause for which Great Britain had fought as consistently or implacably as the independence of the Low Countries. And Great Britain's conduct in the wars against Louis XIV and Napoleon testified to its tenacity. Once engaged, it would fight to the end, even if France were defeated. Nor did the Schlieffen Plan allow for the possibility of failure. If Germany did not destroy the French army—which was possible, since the French had interior lines and railways radiating from Paris whereas the German army had to march by foot in an arc through a devastated countryside—Germany would be forced into Moltke's strategy of defense on both fronts after it had destroyed the possibility of a political compromise peace by occupying Belgium. Where the principal goal of Bismarck's foreign policy had been to avoid a two-front war and of Moltke's military strategy to limit it, Schlieffen insisted on a two-front war conducted in an all-out fashion.

With German deployment focused against France while the most likely origin of the conflict would be in Eastern Europe, Bismarck's nightmare question, "what if there is a two-front war?" was transformed into Schlieffen's nightmare question, "what if there is not a two-front war?" If France

were to declare neutrality in a Balkan war, Germany might face the danger of a French declaration of war *after* Russian mobilization was complete, as Obruchev had already explained from the other side of the European dividing line. If, on the other hand, Germany ignored France's offer of neutrality, Schlieffen's plan would put Germany in the uncomfortable position of attacking non-belligerent Belgium in order to get to non-belligerent France. Schlieffen therefore had to invent a reason to assault France should France stay on the sidelines. He created an impossible standard for what Germany would accept as French neutrality. Germany would regard France as neutral only if it agreed to cede one of its major fortresses to Germany—in other words, only if France put itself at Germany's mercy and abdicated its position as a Great Power.

The unholy mix of general political alliances and hair-trigger military strategies guaranteed a vast bloodletting. The balance of power had lost any semblance of the flexibility it had had during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Wherever war erupted (and it would almost certainly be in the Balkans), the Schlieffen Plan saw to it that the initial battles would be fought in the West between countries having next to no interest in the immediate crisis. Foreign policy had abdicated to military strategy, which now consisted of gambling on a single throw of the dice. A more mindless and technocratic approach to war would have been difficult to imagine.

Though the military leaders of both sides insisted on the most destructive kind of war, they were ominously silent about its political consequences in light of the military technology they were pursuing. What would Europe look like after a war on the scale they were planning? What changes could justify the carnage they were preparing? There was not a single specific Russian demand on Germany or a single German demand on Russia, which merited a local war, much less a general one.

The diplomats on both sides were silent, too, largely because they did not understand the political implications of their countries' time bomb, and because nationalistic politics in each country made them afraid to challenge their military establishments. This conspiracy of silence prevented the political leaders of all the major countries from requesting military plans which established some correspondence between military and political objectives.

Considering the catastrophe they were brewing, there was something almost eerie about the lightheartedness of European leaders as they embarked on their disastrous course. Surprisingly few warnings were ever uttered, an honorable exception being that of Peter Durnovo, a former Russian Interior Minister who became a member of the State Council.

In February 1914—six months before the war—he wrote a prophetic memorandum for the Tsar:

> The main burden of the war will undoubtedly fall on us, since England is hardly capable of taking a considerable part in a continental war, while France, poor in manpower, will probably adhere to strictly defensive tactics, in view of the enormous losses by which war will be attended under present conditions of military technique. The part of a battering-ram, making a breach in the very thick of the German defense, will be ours. . . .[7]

In Durnovo's judgment, these sacrifices would be wasted because Russia would not be able to make permanent territorial gains by fighting on the side of Great Britain, its traditional geopolitical opponent. Though Great Britain would concede gains to Russia in Central Europe, an additional slice of Poland would only magnify the already strong centrifugal tendencies within the Russian Empire. Adding to the Ukrainian population, said Durnovo, would spur demands for an independent Ukraine. Therefore, victory might have the ironic result of fostering enough ethnic turmoil to reduce the Tsar's empire to Little Russia.

Even if Russia realized its century-old goal of conquering the Dardanelles, Durnovo pointed out that such an achievement would prove strategically empty:

> [It] would not give us an outlet to the open sea, however, since on the other side of them there lies a sea consisting almost wholly of territorial waters, a sea dotted with numerous islands where the British navy, for instance, would have no trouble whatever in closing to us every inlet and outlet, irrespective of the Straits.[8]

Why this simple geopolitical fact should have eluded three generations of Russians desiring the conquest of Constantinople—and of Englishmen determined to thwart them—remains a mystery.

Durnovo went on to argue that a war would bring even fewer economic benefits to Russia. By any calculation, it would cost far more than could possibly be recouped. A German victory would destroy the Russian economy while a Russian victory would drain the German economy, leaving nothing for reparations no matter which side won:

> There can be no doubt that the war will necessitate expenditures which are beyond Russia's limited financial means. We shall have to obtain credit from allied and neutral countries, but this will not be granted

> gratuitously. As to what will happen if the war should end disastrously for us, I do not wish to discuss now. The financial and economic consequences of defeat can be neither calculated nor even foreseen, and will undoubtedly spell the total ruin of our entire national economy. But even victory promises us extremely unfavorable financial prospects; a totally ruined Germany will not be in a position to compensate us for the cost involved. Dictated in the interest of England, the peace treaty will not afford Germany opportunity for sufficient economic recuperation to cover our war expenditures, even at a distant time.[9]

Yet Durnovo's strongest reason for opposing the war was his prediction that war would inevitably lead to social revolution—first in the defeated country and then spreading from there to the victor:

> It is our firm conviction, based upon a long and careful study of all contemporary subversive tendencies, that there must inevitably break out in the defeated country a social revolution which, by the very nature of things, will spread to the country of the victor.[10]

There is no evidence that the Tsar saw the memorandum that might have saved his dynasty. Nor is there any record of a comparable analysis in other European capitals. The closest anyone came to Durnovo's views were a few epigrammatic comments by Bethmann-Hollweg, the Chancellor who would lead Germany into the war. In 1913, already much too late, he had expressed, quite accurately, why German foreign policy proved so unsettling to the rest of Europe:

> Challenge everybody, put yourself in everybody's path and actually weaken no one in this fashion. Reason: aimlessness, the need for little prestige successes and solicitude for every current of public opinion.[11]

That same year, Bethmann-Hollweg laid down another maxim, which might have saved his country had it been put into practice twenty years earlier:

> We must keep France in check through a cautious policy towards Russia and England. Naturally this does not please our chauvinists and is unpopular. But I see no alternative for Germany in the near future.[12]

By the time these lines were written, Europe was already headed into the vortex. The locale of the crisis that triggered the First World War was

irrelevant to the European balance of power, and the *casus belli* as accidental as the preceding diplomacy had been reckless.

On June 28, 1914, Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Habsburg throne, paid for Austria's rashness in having annexed Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1908 with his life. Not even the manner of his assassination could escape the singular mix of the tragic and the absurd that marked Austria's disintegration. The young Serbian terrorist failed in his first attempt to assassinate Franz Ferdinand, wounding the driver of the Archduke's vehicle instead. After arriving at the governor's residence and chastising the Austrian administrators for their negligence, Franz Ferdinand, accompanied by his wife, decided to visit the victim at the hospital. The royal couple's new driver took a wrong turn and, in backing out of the street, came to a stop in front of the astonished would-be assassin, who had been drowning his frustrations in liquor at a sidewalk café. With his victims so providentially delivered to him by themselves, the assassin did not fail a second time.

What started out as a near-accident turned into a conflagration with the inevitability of a Greek tragedy. Because the Archduke's wife was not of royal blood, none of the kings of Europe attended the funeral. Had the crowned heads of state congregated and had an opportunity to exchange views, they might have proven more reluctant to go to war a few weeks later over what had been, after all, a terrorist plot.

In all likelihood, not even a royal summit could have prevented Austria from lighting the fuse which the Kaiser now rashly handed it. Remembering his promise of the previous year to back Austria in the next crisis, he invited the Austrian Ambassador to lunch on July 5 and urged speedy action against Serbia. On July 6, Bethmann-Hollweg confirmed the Kaiser's pledge: "Austria must judge what is to be done to clear up her relations with Serbia; but whatever Austria's decision, she could count with certainty upon it, that Germany will stand behind her as an ally."[13]

Austria at last had the blank check it had sought for so long, and a real grievance to which it might be applied. Insensitive as ever to the full implications of his bravado, William II vanished on a cruise to the Norwegian fjords (this in the days before radio). Exactly what he had in mind is not clear, but he obviously did not anticipate a European war. The Kaiser and his chancellor apparently calculated that Russia was not yet ready for war and would stand by while Serbia was humiliated, as it had done in 1908. In any event, they believed they were in a better position for a showdown with Russia than they would be a few years later.

Maintaining their unbroken record of misjudging the psychology of potential adversaries, the German leaders were now as convinced of the vastness of their opportunity as when they had tried to force Great Britain

into an alliance by building a large navy, or to isolate France by threatening war over Morocco. Operating from the assumption that Austria's success might break their ever-tighter encirclement by disillusioning Russia with the Triple Entente, they ignored France, which they deemed irreconcilable, and evaded mediation by Great Britain lest it spoil their triumph. They had persuaded themselves that if, against all expectations, war did break out, Great Britain would either remain neutral or intervene too late. Yet Serge Sazonov, Russia's Foreign Minister at the outbreak of the war, described why Russia would not back off this time:

> Ever since the Crimean War, we could entertain no illusions on the subject of Austria's feelings toward us. On the day she initiated her predatory policy in the Balkans, hoping thereby to prop up the tottering structure of her dominion, her relations with us became more and more unfriendly. We were able, however, to reconcile ourselves to this inconvenience, until it became clear that her Balkan policy had the sympathy of Germany, and received encouragement from Berlin.[14]

Russia felt it had to resist what it interpreted as a German maneuver to destroy its position among the Slavs by humiliating Serbia, its most reliable ally in the area. "It was clear," wrote Sazonov, "that we had to do not with the rash decision of a short-sighted Minister, undertaken at his own risk and on his own responsibility, but with a carefully prepared plan, elaborated with the aid of the German Government, without whose consent and promise of support Austria-Hungary would never have ventured upon its execution."[15]

Another Russian diplomat later wrote nostalgically of the difference between the Germany of Bismarck and the Germany of the Kaiser:

> The Great War was the inevitable consequence of the encouragement given by Germany to Austria-Hungary in her policy of penetration into the Balkans, which was combined with the grandiose Pan-German idea of a Germanized "Middle-Europe." In Bismarck's day this never would have happened. What did happen was the result of Germany's novel ambition to grapple with a task more stupendous than that of Bismarck —without a Bismarck.[16]*

* The Russian memoirs must be taken with a grain of salt because they were trying to shift the total responsibility for the war onto Germany's shoulders. Sazonov in particular must bear part of the blame because he clearly belonged to the war party pushing for full mobilization—even though his overall analysis has much merit.

The Russian diplomats were paying the Germans too great an honor, for the Kaiser and his advisers had no more of a long-range plan in 1914 than they had had during any previous crisis. The crisis over the Archduke's assassination ran out of control because no leader was prepared to back down and every country was concerned above all with living up to formal treaty obligations rather than to an overall concept of long-range common interest. What Europe lacked was some all-encompassing value system to bind the powers together, such as had existed in the Metternich system or the cold-blooded diplomatic flexibility of Bismarck's *Realpolitik*. World War I started not because countries broke their treaties, but because they fulfilled them to the letter.

Of the many curious aspects of the prelude to the First World War, one of the strangest was that nothing happened at first. Austria, true to its operating style, procrastinated, in part because Vienna needed time to overcome the reluctance of Hungarian Prime Minister Stephen Tisza to risk the Empire. When he finally yielded, Vienna issued a forty-eight-hour ultimatum to Serbia on July 23, deliberately putting forward such onerous conditions that they were sure to be rejected. Yet the delay had cost Austria the benefits of the widespread initial feelings of indignation in Europe over the Archduke's assassination.

In Metternich's Europe, with its shared commitment to legitimacy, there can be little doubt that Russia would have sanctioned Austrian retribution against Serbia for the assassination of a prince in direct line of succession to the Austrian throne. But by 1914, legitimacy was no longer a common bond. Russia's sympathy for its ally, Serbia, outweighed its outrage at the assassination of Franz Ferdinand.

For the entire month following the assassination, Austrian diplomacy had been dilatory. Then came the mad rush to cataclysm in the space of less than a week. The Austrian ultimatum drove events out of the control of the political leaders. For once the ultimatum had been issued, any major country was in a position to trigger the irreversible race to mobilization. Ironically, the mobilization juggernaut was set off by the one country for which mobilization schedules were essentially irrelevant. For, alone among all the major powers, Austria's military plans were still old-fashioned in that they did not depend on speed. It mattered little to Austrian war plans which week the war started, as long as its armies were able to fight Serbia sooner or later. Austria had delivered its ultimatum to Serbia in order to forestall mediation, not to speed military operations. Nor did Austrian mobilization threaten any other major power, since it would take a month to be completed.

Thus, the mobilization schedules which made war inevitable were set

in motion by the country whose army did not actually start fighting until *after* the major battles in the West were already over. On the other hand and whatever the state of Austria's readiness, if Russia wanted to threaten Austria, it would have to mobilize some troops, an act which would trigger the irreversible in Germany (though none of the political leaders seemed to have grasped this danger). The paradox of July 1914 was that the countries which had political reasons to go to war were not tied to rigid mobilization schedules while nations with rigid schedules, such as Germany and Russia, had no political reason to go to war.

Great Britain, the country in the best position to arrest this chain of events, hesitated. It had next to no interest in the Balkan crisis, though it did have a major interest in preserving the Triple Entente. Dreading war, it feared a German triumph even more. Had Great Britain declared unambiguously its intentions and made Germany understand that it would enter a general war, the Kaiser might well have turned away from confrontation. That is how Sazonov saw it later:

> I cannot refrain from expressing the opinion that if in 1914 Sir Edward Grey had, as I insistently requested him, made a timely and equally unambiguous announcement of the solidarity of Great Britain with France and Russia, he might have saved humanity from that terrible cataclysm, the consequences of which endangered the very existence of European civilization.[17]

The British leaders were reluctant to risk the Triple Entente by indicating any hesitation to support their allies and, somewhat contradictorily, did not want to threaten Germany so as to keep open the option of mediating at the right moment. As a result, Great Britain fell between two stools. It had no legal obligation to go to war on the side of France and Russia, as Grey assured the House of Commons on June 11, 1914, a little more than two weeks before the Archduke's assassination:

> . . . if war arose between European Powers, there were no unpublished agreements which would restrict or hamper the freedom of the Government or Parliament to decide whether or not Great Britain should participate in a war. . . .[18]

Legally, this was certainly true. But there was an intangible moral dimension involved as well. The French navy was in the Mediterranean because of France's naval agreement with Great Britain; as a result, the coast of northern France would be wide open to the German navy if Great Britain

stayed out of the war. As the crisis developed, Bethmann-Hollweg pledged not to employ the German navy against France if Great Britain promised to remain neutral. But Grey refused this bargain, for the same reason that he had rejected the German offer in 1909 to slow down its naval buildup in return for British neutrality in a European war—he suspected that after France was defeated, Great Britain would be at Germany's mercy.

> You must inform the German Chancellor that his proposal that we should bind ourselves to neutrality on such terms cannot for a moment be entertained.
>
> . . . For us to make this bargain with Germany at the expense of France would be a disgrace from which the good name of this country would never recover.
>
> The Chancellor also in effect asks us to bargain away whatever obligation or interest we have as regards the neutrality of Belgium. We could not entertain that bargain either.[19]

Grey's dilemma was that his country had become snared between the pressures of public opinion and the traditions of its foreign policy. On the one hand, the lack of public support for going to war over a Balkan issue would have suggested mediation. On the other hand, if France were defeated or lost confidence in the British alliance, Germany would be in the dominant position the British had always resisted. Therefore, it is highly probable that, in the end, Great Britain would have gone to war to prevent a French military collapse even if Germany had not invaded Belgium, although it could have taken some time for the British people's support for the war to crystallize. During that period, Great Britain might have tried to mediate. However, Germany's decision to challenge one of the most established principles of English foreign policy—that the Low Countries must not fall into the hands of a major power—served to resolve British doubts and guaranteed that the war would not end with a compromise.

Grey reasoned that, by not taking sides in the early stages of the crisis, Great Britain would retain its claim to the impartiality which might permit it to broker a solution. And past experience supported this strategy. The outcome of heightened international tensions for twenty years had invariably been a conference. However, in no previous crisis had there been any mobilization. As all the Great Powers were getting ready to mobilize, the margin of time available for traditional diplomatic methods vanished. Thus, in the crucial ninety-six hours during which mobilization schedules

destroyed the opportunity for political maneuvering, the British Cabinet in effect assumed the role of bystander.

Austria's ultimatum backed Russia against the wall at a moment when it already believed it had been sorely misused. Bulgaria, whose liberation from Turkish rule had been brought about by Russia through several wars, was leaning toward Germany. Austria, having annexed Bosnia-Herzegovina, seemed to be seeking to turn Serbia, Russia's last significant Balkan ally, into a protectorate. Finally, with Germany establishing itself in Constantinople, Russia could only wonder whether the age of Pan-Slavism might not end in the Teutonic domination of everything it had coveted for a century.

Even so, Tsar Nicholas II was not eager for a showdown with Germany. At a ministerial meeting on July 24, he reviewed Russia's options. The Finance Minister, Peter Bark, reported the Tsar as saying: "War would be disastrous for the world, and once it had broken out it would be difficult to stop." In addition, Bark noted, "The German Emperor had frequently assured him of his sincere desire to safeguard the peace of Europe." And he reminded the ministers of "the German Emperor's loyal attitude during the Russo-Japanese War and during the internal troubles that Russia had experienced afterwards."[20]

The rebuttal came from Aleksandr Krivoshein, the powerful Minister of Agriculture. Demonstrating Russia's endemic refusal to forget a slight, he argued that, despite the Kaiser's kind letters to his cousin, Tsar Nicholas, the German had bullied Russia during the Bosnian crisis of 1908. Therefore, "public and parliamentary opinion would fail to understand why, at the critical moment involving Russia's vital interest, the Imperial Government was reluctant to act boldly. . . . Our exaggeratedly prudent attitudes had unfortunately not succeeded in placating the Central European Powers."[21]

Krivoshein's argument was supported by a dispatch from the Russian Ambassador in Sofia to the effect that, if Russia backed down, "our prestige in the Slav world and in the Balkans would perish never to return."[22] Heads of government are notoriously vulnerable to arguments that question their courage. In the end, the Tsar suppressed his premonitions of disaster and opted for backing Serbia even at the risk of war, though he stopped short of ordering mobilization.

When Serbia responded to Austria's ultimatum on July 25 in an unexpectedly conciliatory fashion—accepting all Austrian demands except one—the Kaiser, just back from his cruise, thought that the crisis was over. But he did not count on Austria's determination to exploit the backing he had proffered so incautiously. Above all, he had forgotten—if

indeed he had ever known it—that, with the Great Powers so close to the brink of war, mobilization schedules were likely to outrun diplomacy.

On July 28, Austria declared war against Serbia, even though it would not be ready for military action until August 12. On the same day, the Tsar ordered partial mobilization against Austria and discovered to his surprise that the only plan the general staff had readied was for general mobilization against both Germany and Austria, despite the fact that for the past fifty years Austria had stood in the way of Russia's Balkan ambitions, and that a localized Austro-Russian war had been a staple of military-staff schools during that entire period. Russia's Foreign Minister, unaware that he was living in a fool's paradise, sought to reassure Berlin on July 28: "The military measures taken by us in consequence of the Austria declaration of war . . . not a single one of them was directed against Germany."[23]

The Russian military leaders, without exception disciples of Obruchev's theories, were appalled by the Tsar's restraint. They wanted general mobilization and thus war with Germany, which had taken no military steps so far. One of the leading generals told Sazonov that "war had become inevitable and that we were in danger of losing it before we had time to unsheath our sword."[24]

If the Tsar had been too hesitant for his generals, he was far too decisive for Germany. All German war plans were based on knocking France out of a war within six weeks, and then turning against a presumably still not fully mobilized Russia. Any Russian mobilization—even a partial one—would cut into this timetable and lower the odds of Germany's already risky gamble. Accordingly, on July 29, Germany demanded that Russia stop its mobilization or Germany would follow suit. And everyone knew that German mobilization was tantamount to war.

The Tsar was too weak to yield. Stopping partial mobilization would have unraveled the entire Russian military planning, and the resistance of his generals convinced him that the die was cast. On July 30, Nicholas ordered full mobilization. On July 31, Germany once more demanded an end to Russian mobilization. When that request was ignored, Germany declared war on Russia. This occurred without a single serious political exchange between St. Petersburg and Berlin about the substance of the crisis, and in the absence of any tangible dispute between Germany and Russia.

Germany now faced the problem that its war plans required an immediate attack on France, which had been quiescent throughout the crisis except to encourage Russia not to compromise by pledging France's unconditional support. Understanding at last where twenty years of histri-

onics had landed him, the Kaiser tried to divert Germany's mobilization away from France and toward Russia. His attempt to rein in the military was as much in vain as the Tsar's previous, similar effort to limit the scope of Russian mobilization. The German general staff was no more willing than its Russian counterpart to scrap twenty years of planning; indeed, no more than the Russian staff did it have an alternate plan. Though both the Tsar and the Emperor had wanted to pull back from the brink, neither knew how to do it—the Tsar because he was prevented from carrying out partial mobilization, the Kaiser because he was kept from mobilizing only against Russia. Both were thwarted by the military machinery which they had helped to construct and which, once set in motion, proved irreversible.

On August 1, Germany inquired of France whether it intended to remain neutral. Had France replied in the affirmative, Germany would have demanded the fortresses of Verdun and Toulon as tokens of good faith. Instead, France replied rather enigmatically that it would act in accordance with its national interest. Germany, of course, had no specific issue with which to justify war with France, which had been a bystander in the Balkan crisis. Again, the mobilization schedules were the driving force. Thus, Germany trumped up some French border violations and, on August 3, declared war. The same day, German troops, carrying out the Schlieffen Plan, invaded Belgium. On the next day, August 4, to the surprise of no one except the German leaders, Great Britain declared war on Germany.

The Great Powers had succeeded in turning a secondary Balkan crisis into a world war. A dispute over Bosnia and Serbia had led to the invasion of Belgium, at the other end of Europe, which had in turn made Great Britain's entry into the war inevitable. Ironically, by the time the decisive battles were being fought on the Western front, Austrian troops had still not taken the offensive against Serbia.

Germany learned too late that there can be no certainty in war and that its obsessive quest for a quick and decisive victory had landed it in a draining war of attrition. In implementing the Schlieffen Plan, Germany dashed all its hopes for British neutrality without succeeding in destroying the French army, which had been the purpose of taking the risks in the first place. Ironically, Germany lost the offensive battle in the West and won the defensive battle in the East, much as the elder Moltke had foreseen. In the end, Germany was obliged to adopt Moltke's defensive strategy in the West as well after having committed itself to a policy which excluded the compromise political peace on which Moltke's strategy had been based.

The Concert of Europe failed miserably because the political leadership had abdicated. As a result, the sort of European Congress which throughout most of the nineteenth century had provided a cooling-off period or led to an actual solution, was not even attempted. European leaders had provided for every contingency except the time needed for diplomatic conciliation. And they had forgotten Bismarck's dictum: "Woe to the leader whose arguments at the end of a war are not as plausible as they were at the beginning."

By the time events had run their course, 20 million lay dead; the Austro-Hungarian Empire had disappeared; three of the four dynasties which entered the war—the German, the Austrian, and the Russian—were overthrown. Only the British royal house remained standing. Afterward, it was hard to recall exactly what had triggered the conflagration. All that anyone knew was that, from the ashes produced by monumental folly, a new European system had to be constructed, though its nature was difficult to discern amidst the passion and the exhaustion deposited by the carnage.