

The Age of Empire

1875-1914

E. J. HOBSBAWM



VINTAGE BOOKS
A DIVISION OF RANDOM HOUSE, INC.
NEW YORK

To the students of Birkbeck College

First Vintage Books Edition, April 1989

Copyright © 1987 by E.J. Hobsbawm

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. Published in the United States by Random House, Inc., New York. Originally published, in Great Britain, by George Weidenfeld and Nicolson Ltd., London, and in the United States by Pantheon Books, a division of Random House, Inc., New York, in 1987.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Hobsbawm, E.J. (Eric J.), 1917-

The age of empire, 1875-1914 / E.J. Hobsbawm.— 1st Vintage Books ed.

p. cm.

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

ISBN 0-679-72175-4 (pbk.)

1. History, Modern—19th century. I. Title.

D359 .7.H63 1989

909.81—dc19

Manufactured in the United States of America

579B86

CONTENTS

Illustrations	ix
Preface	xiii
Overture	i
1 The Centenarian Revolution	13
2 An Economy Changes Gear	34
3 The Age of Empire	56
4 The Politics of Democracy	84
5 Workers of the World	112
6 Waving Flags: Nations and Nationalism	142
7 Who's Who or the Uncertainties of the Bourgeoisie	165
8 The New Woman	192
9 The Arts Transformed	219
10 Certainties Undermined: The Sciences	243
11 Reason and Society	262
12 Towards Revolution	276
13 From Peace to War	302
Epilogue	328
Tables	341
Maps	353
Notes	361
Further Reading	379
Index	391

CHAPTER 13

FROM PEACE TO WAR

In the course of the debate [of 27 March 1900] I explained . . . that I understood by a world policy merely the support and advancement of the tasks that have grown out of the expansion of our industry, our trade, the labour power, activity and intelligence of our people. We had no intention of conducting an aggressive policy of expansion. We wanted only to protect the vital interests that we had acquired, in the natural course of events, throughout the world.

The German chancellor, von Bülow, 1900¹

There is no certainty that a woman will lose her son if he goes to the front; in fact, the coal-mine and the shunting-yard are more dangerous places than the camp.

Bernard Shaw, 1902²

We will glorify war – the world's only hygiene – militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of freedom-bringers, beautiful ideas worth dying for, and scorn for woman.

F. T. Marinetti, 1909³

I

The lives of Europeans since August 1914 have been surrounded, impregnated and haunted by world war. At the time of writing most people on this continent over the age of seventy have passed through at least part of two wars in the course of their lives; all over the age of fifty, with the exception of Swedes, Swiss, Southern Irish and Portuguese, have experienced part of at least one. Even those born since 1945, since the guns ceased to fire across frontiers in Europe, have known scarcely a year when war was not abroad somewhere in the world, and have lived all their lives in the dark shadow of a third, nuclear, world conflict which, as virtually all their governments told them, was held at bay only by the endless competition to ensure mutual annihilation. How can we call such an epoch a time of peace, even if

global catastrophe has been avoided for almost as long as major war between European powers was between 1871 and 1914? For, as the great philosopher Thomas Hobbes observed:

War consisteth not in battle only, or in the act of fighting; but in a tract of time, wherein the will to contend by battle is sufficiently known.⁴

Who can deny that this has been the situation of the world since 1945?

This was not so before 1914: peace was the normal and expected framework of European lives. Since 1815 there had been no war involving all the European powers. Since 1871 no European power had ordered its armed men to fire on those of any other such power. The great powers chose their victims from among the weak, and in the non-European world, though they might miscalculate the resistance of their adversaries: the Boers gave the British far more trouble than expected, and the Japanese established their status as a great power by actually defeating Russia in 1904–5 with surprisingly little trouble. On the territory of the nearest and largest of the potential victims, the long-disintegrating Ottoman Empire, war was indeed a permanent possibility as its subject peoples sought to establish or enlarge themselves as independent states and subsequently fought each other, drawing the great powers into their conflicts. The Balkans were known as the powder-keg of Europe, and indeed that is where the global explosion of 1914 began. But the 'Eastern Question' was a familiar item on the agenda of international diplomacy, and while it had produced a steady succession of international crises for a century, and even one quite substantial international war (the Crimean War), it had never entirely escaped from control. Unlike the Middle East since 1945, the Balkans, for most Europeans who did not live there, belonged to the realm of adventure stories, such as those of the German boys' author Karl May, or of operetta. The image of Balkan wars at the end of the nineteenth century was that of Bernard Shaw's *Arms and the Man*, which was, characteristically, turned into a musical (*The Chocolate Soldier*, by a Viennese composer in 1908).

Of course the possibility of a general European war was foreseen, and preoccupied not only governments and their general staffs, but a wider public. From the early 1870s on, fiction and futurology, mainly in Britain and France, produced generally unrealistic sketches of a future war. In the 1880s Friedrich Engels already analysed the chances of a world war, while the philosopher Nietzsche crazily, but prophetically, hailed the growing militarization of Europe and predicted a war which would 'say yes to the barbarian, even to the wild animal within us'.⁵ In the 1890s the concern about war was sufficient to produce the

World (Universal) Peace Congresses – the twenty-first was due in Vienna in September 1914 – the Nobel Peace prizes (1897) and the first of the Hague Peace Conferences (1899), international meetings by mostly sceptical representatives of governments, and the first of many gatherings since in which governments have declared their unwavering but theoretical commitment to the ideal of peace. In the 1900s war drew visibly nearer, in the 1910s its imminence could and was in some ways taken for granted.

And yet its outbreak was not really *expected*. Even during the last desperate days of the international crisis in July 1914 statesmen, taking fatal steps, did not really believe they were starting a world war. Surely a formula would be found, as so often in the past. The opponents of war could not believe either that the catastrophe they had so long foretold was now upon them. At the very end of July, *after* Austria had already declared war on Serbia, the leaders of international socialism met, deeply troubled but still convinced that a general war was impossible, that a peaceful solution to the crisis would be found. 'I personally do not believe that there will be a general war,' said Victor Adler, chief of Habsburg social democracy, on 29 July.⁶ Even those who found themselves pressing the button of destruction did so, not because they wanted to but because they could not help it, like Emperor William, asking his generals at the very last moment whether the war could not after all be localized in eastern Europe by refraining from attacking France as well as Russia – and being told that unfortunately this was quite impracticable. Those who had constructed the mills of war and turned the switches found themselves watching their wheels beginning to grind in a sort of stunned disbelief. It is difficult for anyone born after 1914 to imagine how deeply the belief that a world war could not 'really' come was engrained in the fabric of life before the deluge.

For most western states, and for most of the time between 1871 and 1914, a European war was thus a historical memory or a theoretical exercise for some undefined future. The major function of armies in their societies during this period was civilian. Compulsory military service – conscription – was by now the rule in all serious powers, with the exception of Britain and the USA, though in fact by no means all young men were conscripted; and with the rise of socialist mass movements generals and politicians were – mistakenly, as it turned out – sometimes nervous about putting arms into the hands of potentially revolutionary proletarians. For the ordinary conscripts, better acquainted with the servitude than the glories of the military life, joining the army became a rite of passage marking a boy's arrival at manhood, followed by two or three years of drill and hard labour, made more tolerable by the notorious attraction of girls to uniforms. For the

professional noncommissioned officers the army was a job. For the officers it was a children's game played by adults, the symbol of their superiority to civilians, of virile splendour and of social status. For the generals it was, as always, the field for those political intrigues and career jealousies which are so amply documented in the memoirs of military chieftains.

For governments and ruling classes, armies were not only forces against internal and external enemies, but also a means of securing the loyalty, even the active enthusiasm, of citizens with troubling sympathies for mass movements which undermined the social and political order. Together with the primary school, military service was perhaps the most powerful mechanism at the disposal of the state for inculcating proper civic behaviour and, not least, for turning the inhabitant of a village into the (patriotic) citizen of a nation. School and military service taught Italians to understand, if not to speak, the official 'national' language, and the army turned spaghetti, formerly a regional dish of the impoverished south, into an all-Italian institution. As for the civilian citizenry, the colourful street theatre of military display was multiplied for their enjoyment, inspiration and patriotic identification: parades, ceremonials, flags and music. For the non-military inhabitants of Europe between 1871 and 1914 the most familiar aspect of armies was probably the ubiquitous military band, without which public parks and public occasions were difficult to imagine.

Naturally soldiers, and rather more rarely sailors, also from time to time carried out their primary functions. They might be mobilized against disorder and protest at moments of disturbance and social crisis. Governments, especially those which had to worry about public opinion and their electors, were usually careful about facing troops with the risk of shooting down their fellow citizens: the political consequences of soldiers firing on civilians were apt to be bad, and those of their refusal to do so were apt to be even worse, as demonstrated in Petrograd in 1917. Nevertheless troops were mobilized often enough, and the number of domestic victims of military repression was by no means negligible during this period, even in central and west European states not believed to be on the verge of revolution, like Belgium and the Netherlands. In countries like Italy they could be very substantial indeed.

For the troops, domestic repression was a harmless pursuit, but the occasional wars, especially in the colonies, were more risky. The risk was, admittedly, medical rather than military. Of the 274,000 US troops mobilized for the Spanish-American War of 1898 only 379 were killed and 1600 wounded, but more than 5000 died of tropical diseases. It is not surprising that governments were keen to support the medical researches which, in our period, achieved some control over yellow

fever, malaria and other scourges of the territories still known as 'the white man's grave'. France lost in colonial operations between 1871 and 1908 an average of eight officers per year, including the only zone of serious casualties, Tonkin, where almost half the 300 officers killed in those thirty-seven years fell.⁷ One would not wish to underestimate the seriousness of such campaigns, all the more so since the losses among the victims were disproportionately heavy. Even for the aggressor countries, such wars could be anything but sporting trips. Britain sent 450,000 men to South Africa in 1899-1902, losing 29,000 killed and died of their wounds and 16,000 by disease, at the cost of £220 million. Such costs were far from negligible. Nevertheless, the soldier's work in western countries was, by and large, considerably less dangerous than that of certain groups of civilian workers such as those in transport (especially by sea) and the mines. In the last three years of the long decades of peace, every year an average of 1430 British coal-miners were killed, an average of 165,000 (or more than 10 per cent of the labour force) injured. And the casualty rate in British coal-mines, though higher than the Belgian or Austrian, was somewhat lower than the French, about 30 per cent below the German, and not much more than one-third of that in the USA.⁸ The greatest risks to life and limb were not run in uniform.

Thus, if we omit Britain's South African War, the life of the soldier and sailor of a great power was peaceful enough, though this was not the case for the armies of tsarist Russia, engaged in serious wars against the Turks in the 1870s, and a disastrous one against the Japanese in 1904-5; nor of the Japanese, who fought both China and Russia successfully. It is still recognizable in the entirely non-fighting memories and adventures of that immortal ex-member of the famous 91st Regiment of the imperial and royal Austrian army, the good soldier Schwejk (invented by its author in 1911). Naturally general staffs prepared for war, as was their duty. As usual most of them prepared for an improved version of the last major war within the experience or memory of the commandants of staff colleges. The British, as was natural for the greatest naval power, prepared for only a modest participation in terrestrial warfare, though it increasingly became evident to the generals arranging for co-operation with the French allies in the years before 1914 that much more would be required of them. But on the whole it was the civilians rather than the men who predicted the terrible transformations of warfare, thanks to the advances of that military technology which the generals - and even some of the technically more open-minded admirals - were slow to understand. Friedrich Engels, that old military amateur, frequently drew attention to their obtuseness, but it was a Jewish financier, Ivan Bloch, who in 1898 published in St

Petersburg the six volumes of his *Technical, Economic and Political Aspects of the Coming War*, a prophetic work which predicted the military stalemate of trench warfare which would lead to a prolonged conflict whose intolerable economic and human costs would exhaust the belligerents or plunge them into social revolution. The book was rapidly translated into numerous languages, without making any mark on military planning.

While only some civilian observers understood the catastrophic character of future warfare, uncomprehending governments plunged enthusiastically into the race to equip themselves with the armaments whose technological novelty would ensure it. The technology of killing, already in the process of industrialization in the middle of the century (see *The Age of Capital*, chapter 4, II), advanced dramatically in the 1880s, not only by virtual revolution in the speed and fire-power of small arms and artillery, but also by the transformation of warships by means of far more efficient turbine-engines, more effective protective armour and the capacity to carry far more guns. Incidentally even the technology of civilian killing was transformed by the invention of the 'electric chair' (1890), though executioners outside the USA remained faithful to old and tried methods such as hanging and beheading.

An obvious consequence was that preparations for war became vastly more expensive, especially as states competed to keep ahead of, or at least to avoid falling behind, each other. This arms race began in a modest way in the later 1880s, and accelerated in the new century, particularly in the last years before the war. British military expenses remained stable in the 1870s and 1880s, both as a percentage of the total budget and per head of the population. But it rose from £32 million in 1887 to £44.1 million in 1898/9 and over £77 million in 1913/14. And, not surprisingly, it was the navy, the high-technology wing of warfare which corresponded to the missile sector of modern armaments expenditure, which grew most spectacularly. In 1885 it had cost the state £11 million – about the same order of magnitude as in 1860. In 1913/14 it cost more than four times as much. Meanwhile German naval expenditure grew even more strikingly: from 90 million Marks per annum in the mid-1890s to almost 400 millions.⁹

One consequence of such vast expenditures was that they required either higher taxes, or inflationary borrowing, or both. But an equally obvious, though often overlooked consequence was that they increasingly made death for various fatherlands a by-product of large-scale industry. Alfred Nobel and Andrew Carnegie, two capitalists who knew what had made them millionaires in explosives and steel respectively, tried to compensate by devoting part of their wealth to the cause of peace. In this they were untypical. The symbiosis of war and war

production inevitably transformed the relations between government and industry, for, as Friedrich Engels observed in 1892, 'as warfare became a branch of the *grande industrie* ... *la grande industrie* ... became a political necessity'.¹⁰ And conversely, the state became essential to certain branches of industry, for who but the government provided the customers for armaments? The goods it produced were determined not by the market, but by the never-ending competition of governments to secure for themselves a satisfactory supply of the most advanced, and hence the most effective, arms. What is more, governments needed not so much the actual output of weapons, but the capacity to produce them on a wartime scale, if the occasion arose; that is to say they had to see that their industry maintained a capacity far in excess of any peacetime requirements.

In one way or another states were thus obliged to guarantee the existence of powerful national armaments industries, to carry much of their technical development costs, and to see that they remained profitable. In other words, they had to shelter these industries from the gales which threatened the ships of capitalist enterprise sailing the unpredictable seas of the free market and free competition. They might of course have engaged in armaments manufacture themselves, and indeed had long done so. But this was the very moment when they – or at least the liberal British state – preferred to come to an arrangement with private enterprise. In the 1880s private armament producers took on more than a third of supply contracts for the armed forces, in the 1890s 46 per cent, in the 1900s 60 per cent: the government, incidentally, was ready to guarantee them two-thirds.¹¹ It is hardly surprising that armaments firms were among, or joined, the giants of industry: war and capitalist concentration went together. In Germany Krupp, the king of cannons, employed 16,000 in 1873, 24,000 around 1890, 45,000 around 1900, and almost 70,000 in 1912 when the fifty-thousandth of Krupp's famous guns left the works. In Britain Armstrong, Whitworth employed 12,000 men at their main works in Newcastle, who had increased to 20,000 – or over 40 per cent of all metalworkers on Tyneside – by 1914, not counting those in the 1500 smaller firms who lived by Armstrong's sub-contracts. They were also very profitable.

Like the modern 'military-industrial complex' of the USA, these giant industrial concentrations would have been nothing without the armaments race of governments. It is therefore tempting to make such 'merchants of death' (the phrase became popular among peace campaigners) responsible for the 'war of steel and gold', as a British journalist was to call it. Was it not logical for the armaments industry to encourage the acceleration of the arms race, if necessary by inventing national inferiorities or 'windows of vulnerability', which could be

removed by lucrative contracts? A German firm, specializing in the manufacture of machine-guns, managed to get a notice inserted in *Le Figaro* to the effect that the French government planned to double the number of its machine-guns. The German government consequently ordered 40 million Marks' worth of these weapons in 1908-10, thus raising the firm's dividends from 20 to 32 per cent.¹² A British firm, arguing that its government had gravely underestimated the German naval rearmament programme, benefited by £250,000 for each new 'dreadnought' built by the British government, which doubled its naval construction. Elegant and shady persons like the Greek Basil Zaharoff, who acted for Vickers (and was later knighted for his services to the Allies in the First World War), saw to it that the arms industry of the great powers sold its less vital or obsolescent products to states in the Near East and Latin America, who were always ready to buy such hardware. In short, the modern international trade in death was well under way.

And yet we cannot explain the world war by a conspiracy of armourers, even though the technicians certainly did their best to convince generals and admirals more familiar with military parades than with science that all would be lost if they did not order the latest gun or battleship. Certainly the accumulation of armaments which reached fearful proportions in the last five years before 1914 made the situation more explosive. Certainly the moment came, at least in the summer of 1914, when the inflexible machine for mobilizing the forces of death could no longer be put into reserve. But what drove Europe into the war was not competitive armament as such, but the international situation which launched powers into it.

II

The argument about the origins of the First World War has never stopped since August 1914. Probably more ink has flowed, more trees have been sacrificed to make paper, more typewriters have been busy, to answer this question than any other in history – perhaps not even excluding the debate on the French Revolution. As generations have changed, as national and international politics have been transformed, the debate has been revived time and again. Hardly had Europe plunged into catastrophe, before the belligerents began to ask themselves why international diplomacy had failed to prevent it, and to accuse one another of responsibility for the war. Opponents of the war immediately began their own analyses. The Russian Revolution of 1917, which published the secret documents of tsarism, accused imperi-

alism as a whole. The victorious Allies made the thesis of exclusive German 'war guilt' the cornerstone of the Versailles peace settlement of 1919, and precipitated a huge flood of documentation and historical propagandist writings for, but mainly against, this thesis. The Second World War naturally revived the debate, which took on yet another lease of life some years later as a historiography of the left reappeared in the German Federal Republic, anxious to break with conservative and Nazi German patriotic orthodoxies, by stressing their own version of Germany's responsibility. Arguments about the dangers to world peace, which have, for obvious reasons, never ceased since Hiroshima and Nagasaki, inevitably seek for possible parallels between the origins of past world wars and current international prospects. While propagandists preferred comparison with the years before the Second World War ('Munich'), historians increasingly found the similarities between the 1980s and the 1910s troubling. The origins of the First World War were thus, once again, a question of burning, immediate relevance. In these circumstances any historian who tries to explain, as a historian of our period must, why the First World War occurred plunges into deep and turbulent waters.

Still, we can at least simplify his task by eliminating questions he does not have to answer. Chief among these is that of 'war guilt', which is one of moral and political judgment, but concerns historians only peripherally. If we are interested in why a century of European peace gave way to an epoch of world wars, the question whose fault it was is as trivial as the question whether William the Conqueror had a good legal case for invading England is for the study of why warriors from Scandinavia found themselves conquering numerous areas of Europe in the tenth and eleventh centuries.

Of course responsibilities can often be assigned in wars. Few would deny that in the 1930s the posture of Germany was essentially aggressive and expansionist, the posture of her adversaries essentially defensive. None would deny that the wars of imperial expansion in our period, such as the Spanish-American War of 1898 and the South African War of 1899-1902, were provoked by the USA and Britain, and not by their victims. In any case everyone knows that all state governments in the nineteenth century, however concerned about their public relations, regarded wars as normal contingencies of international politics, and were honest enough to admit that they might well take the military initiative. Ministries of War had not yet been universally euphemized into Ministries of Defence.

Yet it is absolutely certain that no government of a great power before 1914 wanted either a general European war or even - unlike the 1850s and 1860s - a limited military conflict with another European

great power. This is conclusively demonstrated by the fact that where the political ambitions of the great powers were in direct opposition, namely in the overseas zone of colonial conquests and partitions, their numerous confrontations were always settled by some peaceable arrangement. Even the most serious of these crises, those on Morocco in 1906 and 1911, were defused. On the eve of 1914 colonial conflicts no longer appeared to raise insoluble problems for the various competing powers – a fact which has, quite illegitimately, been used to argue that imperialist rivalries were irrelevant to the outbreak of the First World War.

Of course the powers were far from pacific, let alone pacifist. They prepared for a European war – sometimes wrongly* – even as their foreign ministries did their best to avoid what they unanimously considered a catastrophe. No government in the 1900s pursued aims which, like Hitler's in the 1930s, only war or the constant menace of war could have achieved. Even Germany, whose chief of staff vainly pleaded for a pre-emptive attack against France while her ally Russia was immobilized by war, and later by defeat and revolution, in 1904–5, used the golden opportunity of temporary French weakness and isolation merely to push her imperialist claims on Morocco, a manageable issue over which nobody intended to start a major war, or indeed did so. No government of a major power, even the most ambitious, frivolous and irresponsible, wanted a major one. The old emperor Francis Joseph, announcing the eruption of such a war to his doomed subjects in 1914, was perfectly sincere in saying, 'I did not want this to happen' ('Ich hab es nicht gewollt'), even though it was his government which, in effect, provoked it.

The most that can be claimed is that at a certain point in the slow slide towards the abyss, war seemed henceforth so inevitable that some governments decided that it might be best to choose the most favourable, or least unpropitious, moment for launching hostilities. It has been claimed that Germany looked for such a moment from 1912, but it could hardly have been earlier. Certainly during the final crisis of 1914, precipitated by the irrelevant assassination of an Austrian archduke by a student terrorist in a provincial city deep in the Balkans, Austria knew she risked world war by bullying Serbia, and Germany, deciding to give full backing to her ally, made it virtually certain. 'The balance is tilting against us,' said the Austrian Minister of War on 7 July. Was it not best to fight before it tilted further? Germany followed the same line of argument. Only in this restricted sense has the question

* Admiral Raeder even claimed that in 1914 the German naval staff had no plan for war against Britain.¹³

of 'war guilt' any meaning. But, as the event showed, in the summer of 1914, unlike earlier crises, peace had been written off by all the powers – even by the British, whom the Germans half-expected to stay neutral, thus increasing their chances of defeating both France and Russia.* None of the great powers would have given peace the *coup de grâce* even in 1914, unless they had been convinced that its wounds were already fatal.

The problem of discovering the origins of the First World War is therefore not one of discovering 'the aggressor'. It lies in the nature of a progressively deteriorating international situation which increasingly escaped from the control of governments. Gradually Europe found itself dividing into two opposed blocs of great powers. Such blocs, outside war, were in themselves new, and were essentially due to the appearance on the European scene of a unified German Empire, established by diplomacy and war at others' expense (cf. *The Age of Capital*, chapter 4) between 1864 and 1871, and seeking to protect itself against the main loser, France, by peacetime alliances, which in time produced counter-alliance. Alliances in themselves, though they imply the possibility of war, neither ensure it nor even make it probable. Indeed the German chancellor Bismarck, who remained undisputed world champion at the game of multilateral diplomatic chess for almost twenty years after 1871, devoted himself exclusively, and successfully, to maintaining peace between the powers. A system of power-blocs only became a danger to peace when the opposed alliances were welded into permanence, but especially when the disputes between them turned into unmanageable confrontations. This was to happen in the new century. The crucial question is, why?

However, there was one major difference between the international tensions which led up to the First World War and those which underlay the danger of a third, which people in the 1980s still hoped to avoid. Since 1945 there has never been the slightest doubt about the principal adversaries in a third world war: the USA and the USSR. But in 1880 the line-up of 1914 was quite unpredicted. Naturally some potential allies and enemies were easy to discern. Germany and France would be on opposite sides, if only because Germany had annexed large parts of France (Alsace–Lorraine) after her victory in 1871. Nor was it difficult to predict the permanence of the alliance between Germany and Austria–Hungary, which Bismarck had forged after 1866, for the internal political equilibrium of the new German Empire made it

* The German strategy (the 'Schlieffen Plan' of 1905) envisaged a rapid knock-out blow against France followed by a rapid knock-out blow against Russia. The former meant the invasion of Belgium, thus providing Britain with an excuse for entering the war, to which she had long been effectively committed.

essential to maintain the multinational Habsburg Empire in being. Its disintegration into national fragments would, as Bismarck well knew, not only lead to the collapse of the state system of central and eastern Europe, but would also destroy the basis of a 'little Germany' dominated by Prussia. In fact, both of these things happened after the First World War. The most permanent diplomatic feature of the period 1871-1914 was the 'Triple Alliance' of 1882, which was in effect a German-Austrian alliance, since the third partner, Italy, soon drifted away and eventually joined the anti-German camp in 1915.

Again, it was obvious that Austria, embroiled in turbulent affairs of the Balkans by virtue of her multinational problems, and more deeply than ever since she took over Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1878, found herself opposed to Russia in that region.* Though Bismarck did his best to maintain close relations with Russia, it was possible to foresee that sooner or later Germany would be forced to choose between Vienna and St Petersburg, and could not but opt for Vienna. Moreover, once Germany gave up the Russian option, as happened in the late 1880s, it was logical that Russia and France would come together – as indeed they did in 1891. Even in the 1880s Friedrich Engels had envisaged such an alliance, naturally directed against Germany. By the early 1890s two power-groups therefore faced each other across Europe.

Though this made international relations more tense, it did not make a general European war inevitable, if only because the issues which divided France and Germany (namely Alsace-Lorraine) were of no interest to Austria, and those which risked conflict between Austria and Russia (namely the degree of Russian influence in the Balkans) were insignificant for Germany. The Balkans, Bismarck had observed, were not worth the bones of a single Pomeranian grenadier. France had no real quarrels with Austria, nor Russia with Germany. For that matter the issues which divided France and Germany, though permanent, were hardly considered worth a war by most French, and those dividing Austria and Russia, though – as 1914 showed – potentially more serious, only arose intermittently. Three developments turned the alliance system into a time-bomb: a situation of international flux, destabilized by new problems for and ambitions within the powers, the logic of joint military planning which froze confronting blocs into permanence, and the integration of the fifth great power, Britain, into one of the blocs. (Nobody worried much about the tergiversations of Italy, which was

* The southern Slav peoples were partly under the Austrian half of the Habsburg Empire (Slovenes, Dalmatian Croats), partly under the Hungarian half (Croats, some Serbs), partly under common imperial administration (Bosnia-Herzegovina), the rest in small independent kingdoms (Serbia, Bulgaria and the mini-principality of Montenegro) and under the Turks (Macedonia).

only a 'great power' by international courtesy.) Between 1903 and 1907, to everyone's surprise including her own, Britain joined the anti-German camp. The origin of the First World War can best be understood by tracing the emergence of this Anglo-German antagonism.

The 'Triple Entente' was astonishing both for Britain's enemy and for her allies. In the past Britain had neither tradition of nor any permanent reasons for friction with Prussia – and the same seemed to be true of the super-Prussia now known as the German Empire. On the other hand Britain had been the almost automatic antagonist of France in almost any European war going since 1688. While this was no longer so, if only because France had ceased to be capable of dominating the continent, friction between the two countries was visibly increasing, if only because both competed for the same territory and influence as imperialist powers. Thus relations were unfriendly over Egypt, which was coveted by both but taken over (together with the French-financed Suez Canal) by the British. During the Fashoda crisis of 1898 it looked as though blood might flow, as rival British and French colonial troops confronted each other in the hinterland of the Sudan. In the partition of Africa, more often than not the gains of one were at the expense of the other. As for Russia, the British and Tsarist empires had been permanent antagonists in the Balkan and Mediterranean zone of the so-called 'Eastern Question', and in the ill-defined but bitterly disputed areas of Central and Western Asia which lay between India and the tsar's lands: Afghanistan, Iran and the regions opening on the Persian Gulf. The prospect of Russians in Constantinople – and therefore in the Mediterranean – and of Russian expansion towards India was a standing nightmare for British foreign secretaries. The two countries had even fought in the only nineteenth-century European war in which Britain took part (the Crimean War), and as recently as the 1870s a Russo-British war was seriously on the cards.

Given the established pattern of British diplomacy, a war against Germany was a possibility so remote as to be negligible. A *permanent* alliance with any continental power seemed incompatible with the maintenance of that balance of power which was the chief objective of British foreign policy. An alliance with France could be regarded as improbable, one with Russia almost unthinkable. Yet the implausible became reality: Britain linked up permanently with France and Russia against Germany, settling all differences with Russia to the point of actually agreeing to the Russian occupation of Constantinople – an offer which disappeared from sight with the Russian Revolution of 1917. How and why did this astonishing transformation come about?

It happened because both the players and the rules of the traditional

game of international diplomacy changed. In the first instance, the board on which it was played became much larger. Power rivalry, formerly (except for the British) largely confined to Europe and adjoining areas, was now global and imperial – outside most of the Americas, destined for exclusive US imperial expansion by Washington's Monroe Doctrine. The international disputes which had to be settled, if they were not to degenerate into wars, were now as likely to occur over West Africa and the Congo in the 1880s, China in the late 1890s and the Maghreb (1906, 1911) as over the disintegrating body of the Ottoman Empire, and much more likely than over any issues in non-Balkan Europe. Moreover, there were now new players: the USA which, while still avoiding European entanglements, was actively expansionist in the Pacific, and Japan. In fact Britain's alliance with Japan (1902) was the first step towards the Triple Alliance, since the existence of that new power, which was soon to show that it could actually defeat the Tsarist Empire in war, diminished the Russian threat to Britain and thus strengthened Britain's position. It therefore made the defusion of various ancient Russo-British disputes possible.

This globalization of the international power-game automatically transformed the situation of the country which had, until then, been the only great power with genuinely worldwide political objectives. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that for most of the nineteenth century the function of Europe in British diplomatic calculations was to keep quiet so that Britain could get on with its, mainly economic, activities in the rest of the globe. This was the essence of the characteristic combination of a European balance of power with the global Pax Britannica guaranteed by the only navy of global size, which controlled all the world's oceans and sea-lanes. In the mid-nineteenth century all other navies of the world put together were hardly larger than the British navy alone. By the end of the century this was no longer so.

In the second place, with the rise of a worldwide industrial capitalist economy, the international game was now played for quite different stakes. This does not mean that, to adapt Clausewitz's famous phrase, war was henceforth only the continuation of economic competition by other means. This was a view which tempted the historical determinists at the time, if only because they observed plenty of examples of economic expansion by means of machine-guns and gunboats. Nevertheless, it was a gross oversimplification. If capitalist development and imperialism must bear responsibility for the uncontrolled slide into world conflict, it is impossible to argue that many capitalists themselves were conscious warmongers. Any impartial study of the business press, of the private and commercial correspondence of businessmen, of their public declarations as spokesmen for banking, commerce and industry, shows

quite conclusively that the majority of businessmen found international peace to their advantage. Indeed, war itself was acceptably only insofar as it did not interfere with 'business as usual', and the major objection to war of the young economist Keynes (not yet a radical reformer of his subject) was not only that it killed his friends, but that it inevitably made an economic policy based on 'business as usual' impossible. Naturally there were bellicose economic expansionists, but the Liberal journalist Norman Angell almost certainly expressed business consensus: the belief that war benefited capital was 'The Great Illusion' which gave his book of 1912 its title.

Why indeed should capitalists – even industrialists, with the possible exception of the arms manufacturers – have wished to disturb international peace, the essential framework of their prosperity and expansion, since the fabric of free international business and financial transactions depended on it? Evidently those who did well out of international competition had no cause for complaint. Just as the freedom to penetrate the world's markets has no disadvantages for Japan today, so German industry could well be content with it before 1914. Those who lost out were naturally apt to demand economic protection from their governments, though this is far from the same as demanding war. Moreover, the greatest of the potential losers, Britain, resisted even these demands, and her business interests remained overwhelmingly committed to peace, in spite of the constant fears of German competition which was stridently expressed in the 1890s, and the actual penetration of the British domestic market by German and American capital. As regards Anglo-American relations, we can go even further. If economic competition alone makes for war, Anglo-American rivalry should logically have prepared the ground for military conflict – as some inter-war Marxists still felt it would. Yet it was precisely in the 1900s that the British Imperial General Staff abandoned even the most remote contingency plans for an Anglo-American war. Henceforth this possibility was totally excluded.

And yet the development of capitalism inevitably pushed the world in the direction of state rivalry, imperialist expansion, conflict and war. After 1870, as historians have pointed out:

the shift from monopoly to competition was probably the most important single factor in setting the mood for European industrial and commercial enterprise. Economic growth was also economic struggle – struggle that served to separate the strong from the weak, to discourage some and toughen others, to favour the new, hungry nations at the expense of the old. Optimism about a future of indefinite progress gave way to uncertainty and a sense of agony, in

the classical meaning of the word. All of which strengthened and was in turn strengthened by sharpening political rivalries, the two forms of competition merging.¹⁴

Plainly the economic world was no longer, as it had been in the mid-century, a solar system revolving around a single star, Great Britain. If the financial and commercial transactions of the globe still, and in fact increasingly, ran through London, Britain was evidently no longer the 'workshop of the world', nor indeed its major import market. On the contrary, her relative decline was patent. A number of competing national industrial economies now confronted each other. Under these circumstances economic competition became inextricably woven into the political, even the military, actions of states. The renaissance of protectionism during the Great Depression was the first consequence of this merger. From the point of view of capital, political support might henceforth be essential to keep out foreign competition, and perhaps essential too in parts of the world where the enterprises of national industrial economies competed against one another. From the point of view of states, the economy was henceforth both the very base of international power and its criterion. It was impossible now to conceive of a 'great power' which was not at the same time a 'great economy' – a transformation illustrated by the rise of the USA and the relative weakening of the Tsarist Empire.

Conversely, would not the shifts in economic power, which automatically changed the balance of political and military force, logically entail a redistribution of parts on the international stage? Plainly this was a popular view in Germany, whose staggering industrial growth gave her an incomparably greater international weight than Prussia had had. It is hardly an accident that among German nationalists in the 1890s the old patriotic chant of 'The Watch on the Rhine', directed exclusively against the French, lost ground rapidly to the global ambitions of 'Deutschland Über Alles', which in effect became the German national anthem, though not yet officially.

What made this identification of economic and politico-military power so dangerous was not only national rivalry for world markets and material resources, and for the control of regions such as the Near and Middle East where economic and strategic interests often overlapped. Well before 1914 petro-diplomacy was already a crucial factor in the Middle East, victory going to Britain and France, the western (but not yet American) oil companies and an Armenian middleman, Calouste Gulbenkian, who secured 5 per cent for himself. Conversely, the German economic and strategic penetration of the Ottoman Empire already worried the British and helped to bring Turkey into

the war on the German side. But the novelty of the situation was that, given the fusion between economics and politics, even the peaceful division of disputed areas into 'zones of influence' could not keep international rivalry under control. The key to its controllability – as Bismarck, who managed it with unparalleled mastery between 1871 and 1889, knew – was the deliberate restriction of objectives. So long as states were in a position to define their diplomatic aims precisely – a given shift in frontiers, a dynastic marriage, a definable 'compensation' for the advances made by other states – both calculation and settlement were possible. Neither, of course – as Bismarck himself had proved between 1862 and 1871 – excluded controllable military conflict.

But the characteristic feature of capitalist accumulation was precisely that it had no limit. The 'natural frontiers' of Standard Oil, the Deutsche Bank, the De Beers Diamond Corporation were at the end of the universe, or rather at the limits of their capacity to expand. It was this aspect of the new patterns of world politics which destabilized the structures of traditional world politics. While balance and stability remained the fundamental condition of the European powers in their relations with each other, elsewhere even the most pacific among them did not hesitate to wage war against the weak. Certainly, as we have seen, they were careful to keep their colonial conflicts under control. They never looked like providing the *casus belli* for a major war but undoubtedly precipitated the formation of the international and eventually belligerent blocs: what became the Anglo-Franco-Russian bloc began with the Anglo-French 'cordial understanding' ('Entente Cordiale') of 1904, essentially an imperialist deal by which the French gave up their claims to Egypt in return for British backing for their claims in Morocco – a victim on which Germany also happened to have her eye. Nevertheless, all powers without exception were in an expansionist and conquering mood. Even Britain, whose posture was fundamentally defensive, since her problem was how to protect hitherto uncontested global dominance against the new intruders, attacked the South African republics; nor did she hesitate to consider partitioning the colonies of a European state, Portugal, with Germany. In the global ocean all states were sharks, and all statesmen knew it.

But what made the world an even more dangerous place was the tacit equation of unlimited economic growth and political power, which came to be unconsciously accepted. Thus the German emperor in the 1890s demanded 'a place in the sun' for his state. Bismarck could have claimed as much – and had indeed achieved a vastly more powerful place in the world for the new Germany than Prussia had ever enjoyed. Yet while Bismarck could define the dimensions of his ambitions,

carefully avoiding encroachment into the zone of uncontrollability, for William II the phrase became merely a slogan without concrete content. It simply formulated a principle of proportionality: the more powerful a country's economy, the larger its population, the greater the international position of its nation-state. There were no theoretical limits to the position it might thus feel to be its due. As the nationalist phrase went: 'Heute Deutschland, morgen die ganze Welt' (Today Germany, tomorrow the whole world). Such unlimited dynamism might find expression in political, cultural or nationalist-racist rhetoric: but the effective common denominator of all three was the imperative to expand of a massive capitalist economy watching its statistical curves soaring upwards. Without this it would have had as little significance as the conviction of, say, nineteenth-century Polish intellectuals that their (at the time non-existent) country has a messianic mission in the world.

In practical terms, the danger was not that Germany concretely proposed to take Britain's place as a global power, though the rhetoric of German nationalist agitation readily struck the anti-British note. It was rather that a global power required a global navy, and Germany therefore set out (1897) to construct a great battle-fleet, which had the incidental advantage of representing not the old German states but exclusively the new united Germany, with an officer-corps which represented not Prussian *junkers* or other aristocratic warrior traditions, but the new middle classes, that is to say the new nation. Admiral Tirpitz himself, the champion of naval expansion, denied that he planned a navy capable of defeating the British, claiming that he only wanted one threatening enough to force them into supporting German global, and especially colonial, claims. Besides, could a country of Germany's importance not be expected to have a navy corresponding to her importance?

But from the British point of view the construction of a German fleet was more even than yet another strain on the already globally over-committed British navy, already much outnumbered by the united fleets of rival powers, old and new (though such a union was utterly implausible), and hard put to it to maintain even its more modest aim of being stronger than the next two largest navies combined (the 'two-power standard'). Unlike all other navies, the German fleet's bases were entirely in the North Sea, opposite Britain. Its objective could not be anything except conflict with the British navy. As Britain saw it, Germany was essentially a continental power, and, as influential geopoliticians like Sir Halford Mackinder pointed out (1904), large powers of this sort already enjoyed substantial advantages over a medium-sized island. Germany's legitimate maritime interests were

visibly marginal, whereas the British Empire depended utterly on its sea-routes, and had indeed left the continents (except for India) to the armies of states whose element was the land. Even if the German battle-fleet did absolutely nothing, it must inevitably tie down British ships and thus make difficult, or even impossible, British naval control over waters believed to be vital – such as the Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean and the Atlantic sea-lanes. What was for Germany a symbol of her international status, and of undefined global ambitions, was a matter of life or death for the British Empire. American waters could be – and in 1901 were – abandoned to a friendly USA, Far Eastern waters to the USA and Japan, because these were both powers with, at the time, purely regional interests, which in any case did not seem incompatible with Britain's. Germany's navy, even as a regional navy, which it did not intend to remain, was a threat both to the British Isles and to the global position of the British Empire. Britain stood for as much of the status quo as could be preserved, Germany for its change – inevitably, even if not intentionally, at Britain's expense. Under the circumstances, and given the economic rivalry between the two countries' industries, it was not surprising that Great Britain found herself considering Germany as the most probable and dangerous of potential adversaries. It was logical that she should find herself drawing closer to France and, once the Russian danger had been minimized by Japan, to Russia, all the more so since the Russian defeat had, for the first time in living memory, destroyed that equilibrium of the powers on the European continent which British foreign secretaries had so long taken for granted. It revealed Germany as by far the dominant military force in Europe, as she was already industrially by far the most formidable. This was the background for the surprising Anglo-Franco-Russian Triple Entente.

The division of Europe into the two hostile blocs took almost a quarter of a century, from the formation of the Triple Alliance (1882) to the completion of the Triple Entente (1907). We need not follow it, or the subsequent developments, through all their labyrinthine details. They merely demonstrate that international friction in the period of imperialism was global and endemic, that nobody – least of all the British – knew quite in what direction the cross-currents of their and other powers' interests, fears and ambitions were taking them, and, though it was widely felt that they took Europe towards a major war, none of the governments knew quite what to do about it. Time and again attempts failed to break up the bloc system, or at least to offset it by rapprochements across the blocs: between Britain and Germany, Germany and Russia, Germany and France, Russia and Austria. The blocs, reinforced by inflexible plans for strategy and mobilization, grew more rigid, the continent drifted uncontrollably towards battle, through

a series of international crises which, after 1905, were increasingly settled by 'brinkmanship' – i.e. by the threat of war.

For from 1905 on the destabilization of the international situation in consequence of the new wave of revolutions on the margins of the fully 'bourgeois' societies added new combustible material to a world already preparing to go up in flames. There was the Russian Revolution of 1905, which temporarily incapacitated the Tsarist Empire, encouraging Germany to assert her claims in Morocco, browbeating France. Berlin was forced to retreat at the Algeciras conference (January 1906) by British support for France, partly because a major war on a purely colonial issue was politically unattractive, partly because the German navy felt far too weak as yet to face a war against the British navy. Two years later the Turkish Revolution destroyed the carefully constructed arrangements for international balance in the always explosive Near East. Austria used the opportunity formally to annex Bosnia–Herzegovina (which she had previously just administered), thus precipitating a crisis with Russia, settled only by threat of military support for Austria by Germany. The third great international crisis, over Morocco in 1911, admittedly had little to do with revolution, and everything to do with imperialism – and the shady operations of free-booting businessmen who recognized its multiple possibilities. Germany sent a gunboat ready to seize the south Moroccan port of Agadir, in order to gain some 'compensation' from the French for their imminent 'protectorate' over Morocco, but was forced into retreat by what appeared to be a British threat to go to war on the side of the French. Whether this was actually intended is irrelevant.

The Agadir crisis demonstrated that almost any confrontation between two major powers now brought them to the brink of war. When the collapse of the Turkish Empire continued, with Italy attacking and occupying Libya in 1911, and Serbia, Bulgaria and Greece setting about expelling Turkey from the Balkan peninsula in 1912, all the powers were immobilized, either by unwillingness to antagonize a potential ally in Italy, which was by now uncommitted to either side, or by fear of being dragged into uncontrollable problems by the Balkan states. Nineteen-fourteen proved how right they were. Frozen into immobility they watched Turkey being almost driven out of Europe, and a second war between the victorious Balkan pygmy states redrawing the Balkan map in 1913. The most they could achieve was to establish an independent state in Albania (1913) – under the usual German prince, though such Albanians as cared about the matter would have preferred a maverick English aristocrat who later inspired the adventure novels of John Buchan. The next Balkan crisis was precipitated on 28 June 1914 when the Austrian heir to the throne, the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, visited the capital of Bosnia, Sarajevo.

What made the situation even more explosive was that, precisely in this period, domestic politics in the major powers pushed their foreign policies into the danger-zone. As we have seen (see pp. 109, 300 above), after 1905 the political mechanisms for the stable management of regimes began to creak audibly. It became increasingly difficult to control, still more to absorb and integrate, the mobilizations and counter-mobilizations of subjects in the process of turning into democratic citizens. Democratic politics itself had a high-risk element, even in a state like Britain, careful to keep actual foreign policy secret not only from Parliament but from part of the Liberal cabinet. What turned the Agadir crisis from an occasion for potential horse-trading into a zero-sum confrontation was a public speech by Lloyd George, which seemed to leave Germany with no option except war or retreat. Non-democratic politics were even worse. Could one not argue: 'that the principal cause of the tragic Europe breakdown in July 1914 was the inability of the democratic forces in central and eastern Europe to establish control over the militarist elements in their society and the abdication of the autocrats not to their loyal democratic subjects but to their irresponsible military advisers'?¹⁵ And worst of all, would not countries faced with insoluble domestic problems be tempted to take the gamble of solving them by foreign triumph, especially when their military advisers told them that, since war was certain, the best time for it was now?

This was plainly not the case in Britain and France, in spite of their troubles. It probably was the case in Italy, though fortunately Italian adventurism could not itself set off world war. Was it in Germany? Historians continue to argue about the effect of domestic German politics on its foreign policy. It seems clear that (as in all other powers) grassroots right-wing agitation encouraged and assisted the competitive armaments race, especially at sea. It has been claimed that labour unrest and the electoral advance of Social Democracy made ruling elites keen to defuse trouble at home with success abroad. Certainly there were plenty of conservatives who, like the Duke of Ratibor, thought that a war was needed to get the old order back on its feet, as it had done in 1864-71.¹⁶ Still, probably this amounted to no more than that the civilians would be rather less sceptical of the arguments of their bellicose generals than they might otherwise have been. Was it the case in Russia? Yes, insofar as tsarism, restored after 1905 with modest concessions to political liberalization, probably saw its most promising strategy for revival and reinforcement in the appeal to Great Russian nationalism and the glory of military strength. And indeed, but for the solid and enthusiastic loyalty of the armed forces, the situation in 1913-14 would have been closer to revolution than at any time between 1905 and 1917. Still, in 1914 Russia certainly did not

want war. But, thanks to a few years of military build-up, which German generals feared, it was possible for Russia to contemplate a war in 1914, as it patently had not been a few years earlier.

However, there was one power which could not but stake its existence on the military gamble, because it seemed doomed without it: Austria-Hungary, torn since the mid-1890s by increasingly unmanageable national problems, among which those of the southern Slavs seemed to be the most recalcitrant and dangerous for three reasons. First, because not merely were they troublesome as were other politically organized nationalities in the multinational empire, jostling each other for advantages, but they complicated matters by belonging both to the linguistically flexible government of Vienna and to the ruthlessly magyarizing government of Budapest. Southern Slav agitation in Hungary not only spilled over into Austria, but aggravated the always difficult relations of the two halves of the empire with each other. Second, because the Austrian Slav problem could not be disentangled from Balkan politics, and had indeed since 1878 been even more deeply entangled in them by the occupation of Bosnia. Moreover, there already existed an independent south Slav state of Serbia (not to mention Montenegro, a Homeric little highland state of raiding goatherds, gun-fighters and prince-bishops with a taste for blood-feud and the composition of heroic epics) which could tempt southern Slav dissidents in the empire. Third, because the collapse of the Ottoman Empire virtually doomed the Habsburg Empire, unless it could establish beyond any doubt that it was still a great power in the Balkans which nobody could mess about.

To the end of his days Gavrilo Prinčip, the assassin of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, could not believe that his tiny match put the world in flames. The final crisis in 1914 was so totally unexpected, so traumatic and, in retrospect, so haunting, because it was essentially an incident in Austrian politics which, Vienna felt, required 'teaching Serbia a lesson'. The international atmosphere seemed calm. No foreign office expected trouble in June 1914, and public persons had been assassinated at frequent intervals for decades. In principle, nobody even minded a great power leaning heavily on a small and troublesome neighbour. Since then some five thousand books have been written to explain the apparently inexplicable: how, within a little more than five weeks of Sarajevo, Europe found itself at war.* The immediate answer now seems both clear and trivial: Germany decided to give Austria full backing, that is to say not to defuse the situation. The rest followed inexorably. For by 1914 *any* confrontation between the blocs, in which

* With the exception of Spain, Scandinavia, the Netherlands and Switzerland, all European states were eventually involved in it, as also Japan and the USA.

one side or the other was expected to back down, brought them to the verge of war. Beyond a certain point the inflexible mobilizations of military force, without which such a confrontation would not have been 'credible', could not be reversed. 'Deterrence' could no longer deter but only destroy. By 1914 *any* incident, however random – even the action of an inefficient student terrorist in a forgotten corner of the continent – could lead to such a confrontation, if any single power locked into the system of bloc and counter-bloc chose to take it seriously. Thus war came, and, in comparable circumstances, could come again.

In short, international crisis and domestic crisis merged in the last years before 1914. Russia, once again menaced by social revolution, Austria, threatened by the disintegration of a politically no longer controllable multiple empire, even Germany, polarized and perhaps threatened with immobilism by her political divisions – all tilted towards their military and its solutions. Even France, united by a reluctance to pay taxes and therefore to find money for massive rearmament (it was easier to extend conscript service again to three years), elected a president in 1913 who called for revenge against Germany and made warlike noises, echoing the generals who were now, with murderous optimism, abandoning a defensive strategy for the prospect of a storming offensive across the Rhine. The British preferred battle-ships to soldiers: the navy was always popular, a national glory acceptable to Liberals as the protector of trade. Naval scares had political sex-appeal, unlike army reforms. Few, even among their politicians, realized that the plans for joint war with France implied a mass army and eventually conscription, and indeed they did not seriously envisage anything except a primarily naval and trade war. Still, even though the British government remained pacific to the last – or rather, refused to take a stand for fear of splitting the Liberal government – it could not consider staying out of the war. Fortunately the German invasion of Belgium, long prepared under the Schlieffen Plan, provided London with a morality cover for diplomatic and military necessity.

But how would the masses of Europeans react to a war which could not but be a war of the masses, since all belligerents except the British prepared to fight it with conscript armies of enormous size? In August 1914, even before hostilities broke out 19 million, and potentially 50 million, armed men faced each other across the frontiers.¹⁷ What would the attitude of these masses be when called to the colours, and what would the impact of war be on civilians especially if, as some military men shrewdly suspected – though taking little account of it in their planning – the war would not be over quickly? The British were particularly alive to this problem, because they relied exclusively on volunteers to reinforce their modest professional army of 20 divisions

(compared with 74 French, 94 German and 108 Russian ones), because their working classes were fed mainly by food shipped from overseas which was extremely vulnerable to a blockade, and because in the immediate pre-war years government faced a public mood of social tension and agitation unknown in living memory, and an explosive situation in Ireland. 'The atmosphere of war', thought the Liberal minister John Morley, 'cannot be friendly to order in a democratic system that is verging on the humour of [18]48.'^{*} But the domestic atmosphere of the other powers was also such as to disturb their governments. It is a mistake to believe that in 1914 governments rushed into war to defuse their internal social crises. At most, they calculated that patriotism would minimize serious resistance and non-cooperation.

In this they were correct. Liberal, humanitarian and religious opposition to war had always been negligible in practice, though no government (with the eventual exception of the British) was prepared to recognize a refusal to perform military service on grounds of conscience. The organized labour and socialist movements were, on the whole, passionately opposed to militarism and war, and the Labour and Socialist International even committed itself in 1907 to an international general strike against war, but hard-headed politicians did not take this too seriously, though a wild man on the right assassinated the great French socialist leader and orator Jean Jaurès a few days before the war, as he desperately tried to save the peace. The main socialist parties were against such a strike, few believed it to be feasible, and in any case, as Jaurès recognized, 'once war has broken out, we can take no further action'.²⁰ As we have seen, the French Minister of the Interior did not even bother to arrest the dangerous anti-war militants of whom the police had carefully prepared a list for this purpose. Nationalist dissidence did not prove to be a serious factor immediately. In short, the governments' calls to arms met with no effective resistance.

But governments were mistaken in one crucial respect: they were taken utterly by surprise, as were the opponents of the war, by the extraordinary wave of patriotic enthusiasm with which their people appeared to plunge into a conflict in which at least 20 millions of them were to be killed and wounded, without counting the incalculable millions of births forgone and excess civilian deaths through hunger and disease. The French authorities had reckoned with 5-13 per cent of deserters: in fact only 1.5 per cent dodged the draft in 1914. In Britain, where political opposition to the war was strongest, and where it was deeply rooted in Liberal as well as Labour and socialist tradition,

^{*} Paradoxically the fear of the possible effects of starvation on the British working class suggested to naval strategists the possibility of destabilizing Germany by a blockade which would starve its people. This was in fact attempted with considerable success during the war.¹⁹

750,000 volunteered in the first eight weeks, a further million in the next eight months.²¹ The Germans, as expected, did not dream of disobeying orders. 'How will anyone be able to say we do not love our fatherland when after the war so and so many thousands of our good party comrades say "we have been decorated for bravery".' Thus wrote a German social democratic militant, having just won the Iron Cross in 1914.²² In Austria not only the dominant people were shaken by a brief wave of patriotism. As the Austrian socialist leader Victor Adler acknowledged, 'even in the nationalities struggle war appears as a kind of deliverance, a hope that something different will come'.²³ Even in Russia, where a million deserters had been expected, all but a few thousands of the 15 millions obeyed the call to the colours. The masses followed the flags of their respective states, and abandoned the leaders who opposed the war. There were, indeed, few enough left of these, at least in public. In 1914 the peoples of Europe, for however brief a moment, went lightheartedly to slaughter and to be slaughtered. After the First World War they never did so again.

They were surprised by the moment, but no longer by the fact of war, to which Europe had become accustomed, like people who see a thunderstorm coming. In a way its coming was widely felt as a release and a relief, especially by the young of the middle classes – men very much more than women – though less so by workers and least by peasants. Like a thunderstorm it broke the heavy closeness of expectation and cleared the air. It meant an end to the superficialities and frivolities of bourgeois society, the boring gradualism of nineteenth-century improvement, the tranquillity and peaceful order which was the liberal utopia for the twentieth century and which Nietzsche had prophetically denounced, together with the 'pallid hypocrisy administered by mandarins'.²⁴ After a long wait in the auditorium, it meant the opening of the curtain on a great and exciting historical drama in which the audience found itself to be the actors. It meant decision.

Was it recognized as the crossing of a historical frontier – one of those rare dates marking the periodization of human civilization which are more than pedagogic conveniences? Probably yes, in spite of the widespread expectations of a short war, of a foreseeable return to ordinary life and the 'normalcy' retrospectively identified with 1913, which imbues so many of the recorded opinions of 1914. Even the illusions of the patriotic and militarist young who plunged into war as into a new element, 'like swimmers into cleanness leaping'.²⁵ had implied utter change. The sense of the war as an epoch ended was perhaps strongest in the world of politics, even though few were as clearly aware as the Nietzsche of the 1880s of the 'era of monstrous [*ungeheure*] wars, upheavals [*Umstürze*], explosions' which had now begun,²⁶ and even

FROM PEACE TO WAR

fewer on the left, interpreting it in their own way, saw hope in it, like Lenin. For the socialists the war was an immediate and double catastrophe, as a movement devoted to internationalism and peace collapsed suddenly into impotence, and the wave of national union and patriotism under the ruling classes swept, however momentarily, over the parties and even the class-conscious proletariat in the belligerent countries. And among the statesmen of the old regimes there was at least one who recognized that all had changed. 'The lamps are going out all over Europe,' said Edward Grey, as he watched the lights of Whitehall turned off on the evening when Britain and Germany went to war. 'We shall not see them lit again in our lifetime.'

Since August 1914 we have lived in the world of monstrous wars, upheavals and explosions which Nietzsche prophetically announced. That is what has surrounded the era before 1914 with the retrospective haze of nostalgia, a faintly golden age of order and peace, of unproblematic prospects. Such back projections of imaginary good old days belong to the history of the last decades of the twentieth century, not the first. Historians of the days before the lights went out are not concerned with them. Their central preoccupation, and the one which runs through the present book, must be to understand and to show how the era of peace, of confident bourgeois civilization, growing wealth and western empires inevitably carried within itself the embryo of the era of war, revolution and crisis which put an end to it.

FURTHER READING

The English edition of Marc Ferro's *The Russian Revolution of February 1917* contains a convenient bibliography.

The English bibliography of the other great revolution, the Chinese, is also lengthening, though by far the greatest part of it deals with the period since 1911. J. K. Fairbank, *The United States and China* (1979) is really a short modern history of China. The same author's *The Great Chinese Revolution 1800-1985* (1986) is even better. Franz Schurmann and Orville Schell (eds.), *China Readings 1: Imperial China* (1967) provides background; F. Wakeman, *The Fall of Imperial China* (1975) lives up to its title. V. Purcell, *The Boxer Rising* (1963) is the fullest account of this episode. Mary Clabaugh Wright (ed.), *China in Revolution: the First Phase 1900-1915* (1968) may introduce readers to more monographic studies.

On the transformations of other ancient eastern empires, Nikki R. Keddie, *Roots of Revolution: An Interpretive History of Modern Iran* (1981) is authoritative. On the Ottoman Empire, Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey* (1961, revised 1969) and D. Kushner, *The Rise of Turkish Nationalism 1876-1908* (1977) may be supplemented by N. Berkes, *The Development of Secularism in Turkey* (1964) and Roger Owen, *The Middle East in the World Economy* (1981).

For the only actual revolution erupting out of imperialism in our period, the Mexican, two works may serve as an introduction: the early chapters of Friedrich Katz, *The Secret War in Mexico* (1981) – or the same author's chapter in the *Cambridge History of Latin America* – and John Womack, *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution* (1969). Both authors are superb. There is no equally good introduction to the much-disputed history of Indian national liberation. Judith Brown's *Modern India* (1985) provides the best start, A. Maddison, *Class Structure and Economic Growth in India and Pakistan Since the Mughals* (1971) the economic and social background. For those who want a taste of the more monographic, C. A. Bayly, *The Local Roots of Indian Politics: Allahabad 1880-1920* (1975) is by a brilliant Indianist; L. A. Gordon, *Bengal: The Nationalist Movement 1876-1940* (1974) is about the most radical region.

On the Islamic region outside Turkey and Iran, there is not much to recommend. P. J. Vatikiotis, *The Modern History of Egypt* (1969) may be consulted, but the famous anthropologist E. Evans-Pritchard's *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica* (1949) (on Libya) is more fun. It was written to inform the British commanders who found themselves fighting in these deserts in the Second World War.

PEACE AND WAR

A good recent introduction to the problems of the origin of the First World War is James Joll, *The Origins of the First World War* (1984). A. J. P. Taylor, *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe* (1954) is old but

excellent on the complications of international diplomacy. Paul Kennedy, *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism 1860-1914* (1980), Zara Steiner, *Britain and the Origins of the First World War* (1977), F. R. Bridge, *From Sadowa to Sarajevo: The Foreign Policy of Austria-Hungary 1866-1914* (1976) and Volker Berghahn, *Germany and the Approach of War* (1973) are fine examples of recent monographs. Geoffrey Barraclough's *From Agadir to Armageddon: The Anatomy of a Crisis* (1982) is the work of one of the most original historians of his time. For war and society in general, William H. McNeil, *The Pursuit of Power* (1982) is stimulating; for the specific period of the present book, Brian Bond, *War and Society in Europe 1870-1970* (1983); for the pre-war arms race, Norman Stone, *The Eastern Front 1914-1917* (1978), chapters 1-2. Marc Ferro, *The Great War* (1973) is a good conspectus of the impact of war. Robert Wohl, *The Generation of 1914* (1979) discusses some of those who looked forward to war; Georges Haupt, *Aspects of International Socialism 1871-1914* (1986) discuss those who did not – and, with special brilliance, Lenin's attitude to war and revolution.

Note: This guide to further reading has assumed that readers are in command only of English. Unfortunately today this is likely to be the case in the Anglo-Saxon world. It also assumes that, if sufficiently interested, they will consult the numerous specialist academic journals in the historical field.