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Part



War and International Relations

Chapter

1

The world in 1914: outbreak of the First World War

1.1 PROLOGUE

Under cover of darkness late on the night of 5 August 1914, five columns of German assault troops, which had entered Belgium two days earlier, were converging on the town of Liège, expecting little resistance. To their surprise they were halted by determined fire from the town's outlying forts. This was a setback for the Germans: control of Liège was essential before they could proceed with their main operation against France. They were forced to resort to siege tactics, using heavy howitzers. These fired shells up into the air and they plunged from a height of 12 000 feet to shatter the armour-plating of the forts. Strong though they were, these Belgian forts were not equipped to withstand such a battering for long; on 13 August the first one surrendered and three days later Liège was under German control. This was the first major engagement of the First World War, that horrifying conflict of monumental proportions which was to mark the beginning of a new era in European and world history.

1.2 THE WORLD IN 1914

(a) Europe still dominated the rest of the world in 1914

Most of the decisions which shaped the fate of the world were taken in the capitals of Europe. Germany was the leading power in Europe both militarily and economically. She had overtaken Britain in the production of pig-iron and steel, though not quite in coal, while France, Belgium, Italy and Austria–Hungary (known as the Habsburg Empire) were well behind. Russian industry was expanding rapidly but had been so backward to begin with that she could not seriously challenge Germany and Britain. But it was outside Europe that the most spectacular industrial progress had been made during the previous 40 years. In 1914 the USA produced more coal, pig-iron and steel than either Germany or Britain and now ranked as a world power. Japan too had modernized rapidly and was a power to be reckoned with after her defeat of Russia in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–5.

(b) The political systems of these world powers varied widely

The USA, Britain and France had *democratic forms of government*. This means that they each had a parliament consisting of representatives elected by the people; these parliaments had an important say in running the country. Some systems were not as democratic as they seemed: Germany had an elected lower house of parliament (Reichstag), but real power lay with the Chancellor (a sort of prime minister) and the Kaiser (emperor). Italy

was a monarchy with an elected parliament, but the franchise (right to vote) was limited to wealthy people. Japan had an elected lower house, but here too the franchise was restricted, and the emperor and the privy council held most of the power. The governments in Russia and Austria–Hungary were very different from the democracy of the West. The Tsar (emperor) of Russia and the Emperor of Austria (who was also King of Hungary) were *autocratic* or *absolute rulers*. This means that although parliaments existed, they could only advise the rulers; if they felt like it, the rulers could ignore the parliaments and do exactly as they wished.

(c) Imperial expansion after 1880

The European powers had taken part in a great burst of imperialist expansion in the years after 1880. *Imperialism* is the building up of an empire by seizing territory overseas. Most of Africa was taken over by the European states in what became known as the ‘the Scramble for Africa’; the idea behind it was mainly to get control of new markets and new sources of raw materials. There was also intervention in the crumbling Chinese Empire; the European powers, the USA and Japan all, at different times, forced the helpless Chinese to grant trading concessions. Exasperation with the incompetence of their government caused the Chinese to overthrow the ancient Manchu dynasty and set up a republic (1911).

(d) Europe had divided itself into two alliance systems

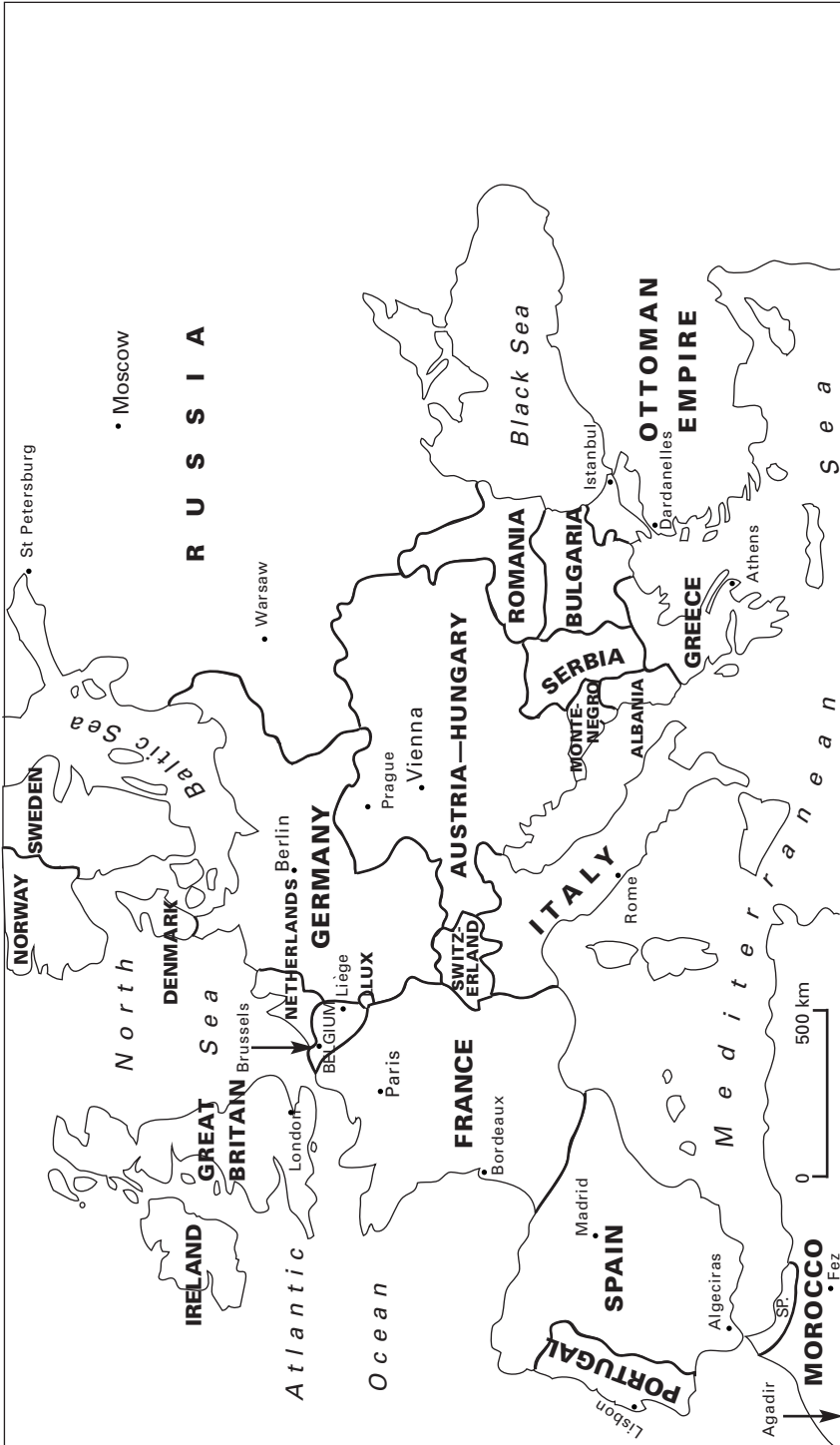
<i>The Triple Alliance:</i>	Germany Austria–Hungary Italy
<i>The Triple Entente:</i>	Britain France Russia

In addition, Japan and Britain had signed an alliance in 1902. Friction between the two main groups (sometimes called ‘the armed camps’) had brought Europe to the verge of war several times since 1900 (Map 1.1).

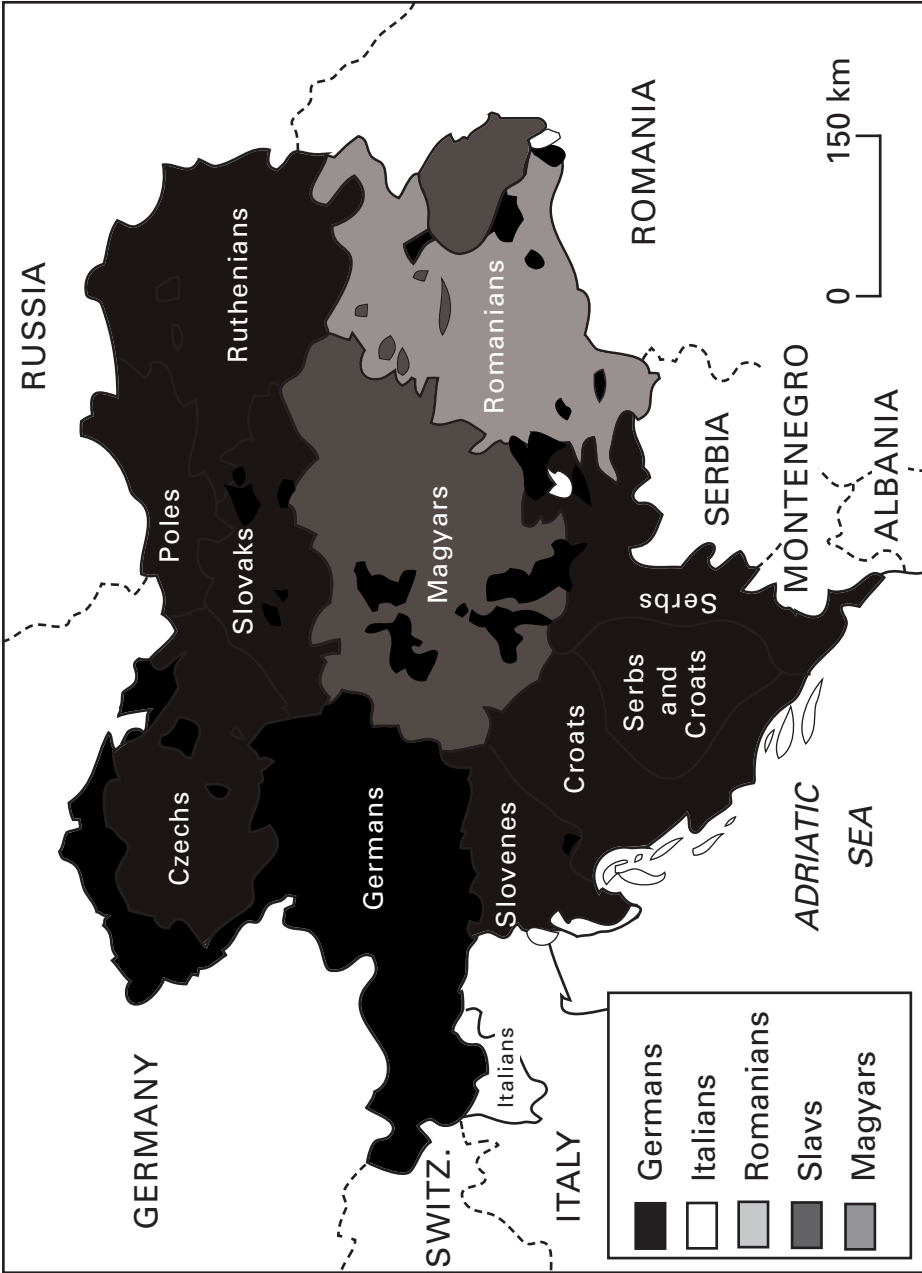
(e) Causes of friction

There were many causes of friction which threatened to upset the peace of Europe:

- There was naval rivalry between Britain and Germany.
- The French resented the loss of Alsace–Lorraine to Germany at the end of the Franco-Prussian War (1871).
- The Germans accused Britain, Russia and France of trying to ‘encircle’ them; the Germans were also disappointed with the results of their expansionist policies (known as *Weltpolitik* – literally ‘world policy’). Although they had taken possession of some islands in the Pacific and some territory in Africa, their empire was small in comparison with those of the other European powers, and not very rewarding economically.



Map 1.1 Europe in 1914



Map 1.2 Peoples of the Habsburg Empire

- The Russians were suspicious of Austrian ambitions in the Balkans and worried about the growing military and economic strength of Germany.
- Serbian *nationalism* (the desire to free your nation from control by people of another nationality) was probably the most dangerous cause of friction. Since 1882 the Serbian government of King Milan had been pro-Austrian, and his son Alexander, who came of age in 1893, followed the same policy. However, the Serbian nationalists bitterly resented the fact that by the Treaty of Berlin signed in 1878, the Austrians had been allowed to occupy Bosnia, an area which the Serbs thought should be part of a Greater Serbia. The nationalists saw Alexander as a traitor; in 1903 he was murdered by a group of army officers, who put Peter Karageorgević on the throne. The change of regime caused a dramatic switch in Serbian policy: the Serbs now became pro-Russian and made no secret of their ambition to unite all Serbs and Croats into a large South Slav kingdom (Yugoslavia). Many of these Serbs and Croats lived inside the borders of the Habsburg Empire; if they were to break away from Austria–Hungary to become part of a Greater Serbia, it would threaten to break up the entire ramshackle Habsburg Empire, which contained people of many different nationalities (Map 1.2). There were Germans, Hungarians, Magyars, Czechs, Slovaks, Italians, Poles, Romanians, Ruthenians and Slovenes, as well as Serbs and Croats. If the Serbs and Croats left the fold, many of the others would demand their independence as well, and the Hapsburg Empire would break up. Consequently some Austrians were keen for what they called a ‘preventive war’ to destroy Serbia before she became strong enough to provoke the break-up of their empire. The Austrians also resented Russian support for Serbia.

Arising from all these resentments and tensions came a series of events which culminated in the outbreak of war in late July 1914.

1.3 EVENTS LEADING UP TO THE OUTBREAK OF WAR

Time chart of main events

Europe divides into two armed camps:

1882	Triple Alliance of Germany, Austria–Hungary and Italy
1894	France and Russia sign alliance
1904	Britain and France sign ‘Entente Cordiale’ (friendly ‘getting-together’)
1907	Britain and Russia sign agreement.

Other important events:

1897	Admiral Tirpitz’s Navy Law – Germany intends to build up fleet
1902	Britain and Japan sign alliance
1904–5	Russo-Japanese War, won by Japan
1905–6	Moroccan Crisis
1906	Britain builds first ‘Dreadnought’ battleship
1908	Bosnia Crisis
1911	Agadir Crisis
1912	First Balkan War

1913	Second Balkan War	
1914	28 June	Archduke Franz Ferdinand assassinated in Sarajevo
	28 July	Austria–Hungary declares war on Serbia
	29 July	Russia orders general mobilization of troops
	1 August	Germany declares war on Russia
	3 August	Germany declares war on France
	4 August	Britain enters war
	6 August	Austria–Hungary declares war on Russia.

(a) The Moroccan Crisis (1905–6)

This was an attempt by the Germans to expand their empire and to test the recently signed Anglo-French ‘Entente Cordiale’ (1904), with its understanding that France would recognize Britain’s position in Egypt in return for British approval of a possible French takeover of Morocco; this was one of the few remaining areas of Africa not controlled by a European power. The Germans announced that they would assist the Sultan of Morocco to maintain his country’s independence, and demanded an international conference to discuss its future. A conference was duly held at Algeciras in southern Spain (January 1906). The British believed that if the Germans had their way, it would lead to virtual German control of Morocco. This would be an important step on the road to German diplomatic domination and it would encourage them to press ahead with their *Weltpolitik*. The British, who had just signed the ‘Entente Cordiale’ with France, were determined to lead the opposition to Germany at the conference. The Germans did not take the ‘Entente’ seriously because there was a long history of hostility between Britain and France. But to the amazement of the Germans, Britain, Russia, Italy and Spain supported the French demand to control the Moroccan bank and police. It was a serious diplomatic defeat for the Germans, who realized that the new line-up of Britain and France was a force to be reckoned with, especially as the crisis was soon followed by Anglo-French ‘military conversations’.

(b) The British agreement with Russia (1907)

This was regarded by the Germans as another hostile move. In fact it was a logical step, given that in 1894 Russia had signed an alliance with France, Britain’s new partner in the ‘Entente Cordiale’. For many years the British had viewed Russia as a disgraceful example of corrupt, anti-democratic aristocratic government. Worse still, the Russians were seen as a major threat to British interests in the Far East and India. However, the situation had recently changed. Russia’s defeat by Japan in the war of 1904–5 seemed to suggest that the Russians were no longer much of a military threat. The outbreak of revolution in Russia in January 1905 had weakened the country internally. The Russians were keen to end the long-standing rivalry and anxious to attract British investment for their industrial modernization programme. In October 1905, when the tsar granted the Russian people freedom of speech and the right to have an elected parliament, the British began to feel more kindly disposed towards the tsarist system. It made agreement possible and the two governments were able therefore to settle their remaining differences in Persia, Afghanistan and Tibet. It was not a military alliance and not necessarily an anti-German move, but the Germans saw it as confirmation of their fears that Britain, France and Russia were planning to ‘encircle’ them.

(c) The Bosnia Crisis (1908)

The crisis over Bosnia, a province of Turkey, brought the tension between Austria–Hungary and Serbia to fever pitch. In 1878 the Congress of Berlin had reached the rather confusing decision that Bosnia should remain officially part of Turkey, but that Austria–Hungary should be allowed to administer it. In 1908 there was a new government in Turkey, dominated by a group of army officers (known as Young Turks), who resented the Austrian presence in Bosnia and were determined to assert Turkish control over the province. This gave the Austrians the chance to get in first: they announced the formal annexation (takeover) of Bosnia. This was a deliberate blow at the neighbouring state of Serbia, which had also been hoping to take Bosnia since it contained about three million Serbs among its mixed population of Serbs, Croats and Muslims. The Serbs appealed for help to their fellow Slavs, the Russians, who called for a European conference, expecting French and British support. When it became clear that Germany would support Austria in the event of war, the French drew back, unwilling to become involved in a war in the Balkans. The British, anxious to avoid a breach with Germany, did no more than protest to Austria–Hungary. The Russians, still smarting from their defeat by Japan, dared not risk another war without the support of their allies. There was to be no help for Serbia; no conference took place, and Austria kept Bosnia. It was a triumph for the Austro-German alliance, *but it had unfortunate results*:

- Serbia remained bitterly hostile to Austria, and it was this quarrel which sparked off the outbreak of war.
- The Russians were determined to avoid any further humiliation and embarked on a massive military build-up and modernization of the army, together with an improvement in their railway system to allow faster mobilization. They intended to be prepared if Serbia should ever appeal for help again.

(d) The Agadir Crisis (1911)

This crisis was caused by further developments in the situation in Morocco. French troops occupied Fez, the Moroccan capital, to put down a rebellion against the Sultan. It looked as if the French were about to annex Morocco. The Germans sent a gunboat, the *Panther*, to the Moroccan port of Agadir, hoping to pressurize the French into giving Germany compensation, perhaps the French Congo. The British were worried in case the Germans acquired Agadir, which could be used as a naval base from which to threaten Britain's trade routes. In order to strengthen French resistance, Lloyd George (Britain's Chancellor of the Exchequer) used a speech which he was due to make at the Lord Mayor of London's banquet at the Mansion House, to warn the Germans off. He said that Britain would not stand by and be taken advantage of 'where her interests were vitally affected'. The French stood firm, making no major concessions, and eventually the German gunboat was removed. The Germans agreed to recognize the French protectorate (the right to 'protect' the country from foreign intervention) over Morocco in return for two strips of territory in the French Congo. This was seen as a triumph for the Entente powers, but in Germany public opinion became intensely anti-British, especially as the British were drawing slowly ahead in the 'naval race'. At the end of 1911 they had built eight of the new and more powerful 'Dreadnought'-type battleships, compared with Germany's four.

(e) The First Balkan War (1912)

The war began when Serbia, Greece, Montenegro and Bulgaria (calling themselves the Balkan League) launched a series of attacks on Turkey. These countries had all, at one time, been part of the Turkish (Ottoman) Empire. Now that Turkey was weak (regarded by the other powers as ‘the Sick Man of Europe’), they seized their chance to acquire more land at Turkey’s expense. They soon captured most of the remaining Turkish territory in Europe. Together with the German government, Sir Edward Grey, the British Foreign Secretary, arranged a peace conference in London. He was anxious to avoid the conflict spreading, and also to demonstrate that Britain and Germany could still work together. The resulting settlement divided up the former Turkish lands among the Balkan states. However, the Serbs were not happy with their gains: they wanted Albania, which would



Map 1.3 The Balkans in 1913 showing changes from the Balkan Wars (1912–13)

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