CHAPTER XV

Wilhelmian Germany. II, Foreign Affairs (1890-1914)

German foreign policy during the personal rule of William II is sharply contrasted with that of the period dominated by Bismarck. The steadying influence of the old master was gone and the new policy was mercurial, unpredictable, and, on the whole, unsuccessful. There are several reasons for this change. A first is the changed quality of international affairs, which were now world-wide in scope rather than continental. Secondly, of course, the personality of the emperor set the tone for his policy. Finally, after 1890, policy was never in the hands of one man; in fact, it is often hard to know who was in charge. During the Caprivi and Hohenlohe ministries the secretaries of state for foreign affairs, Marschall von Bieberstein and Bernhard von Bülow, were much more influential than their predecessors under Bismarck. Another important influence was Count Philipp von Eulenburg, the emperor's one close personal friend. Finally, and possibly most important, was the bizarre, sinister, and misanthropic figure of Baron Fritz von Holstein. After his unsavory connection with the von Arnim affair, Holstein, disliked by, and disliking, society, retired to the recesses of the foreign office and there labored under Bismarck for many years, making himself more familiar than anyone else with the business of that office. After the retirement of Bismarck and his son, Holstein became the indispensable man, and until his resignation in 1906 was the determining force in many of the most important decisions.

The first major decision of the new regime in 1890 was the question of the renewal of the Reinsurance Treaty with Russia, which was to lapse in the summer of that year. At first blush William and Caprivi were inclined to renew the treaty and so informed the Russian ambassador. However, Holstein was opposed to it and in the course of a few days
CONVINced the emperor and chancellor that it violated the spirit of the
Triple Alliance. The decision was made not to renew the treaty. Many
historians, encouraged by Bismarck in retirement, have blamed this de-
cision for the subsequent Franco-Russian alliance which followed soon
after it. Probably this is pushing the point too far. Germany chose once
for all between Russia and Austria. The Russian friendship would have
been difficult to retain because of the forward policy which Germany
later undertook in the Balkans and the Middle East. Yet it remains true
that having let one relationship lapse, Germany should have sought an-
other, probably in London. In fact, she did the opposite by a series of
sniping attacks on Britain which conditioned the British to enter the
opposite camp in 1904.

One episode in 1890 suggested that perhaps Germany and Great
Britain were going to move closer to each other. This was the treaty by
which Germany relinquished her rights in the neighborhood of Zanzibar
in East Africa and in return received from Britain the little island of
Heligoland off the mouth of the Elbe River. This agreement received a
good deal of criticism in Germany, especially by the colonialists, who
felt that Germany had surrendered far too much for what she gained.
However, the importance of Heligoland in both world wars of the
twentieth century suggests that Germany was not the loser.

As the decade of the nineties wore on, German policy became more
and more marked by a spirit of adventurousness, described by the Ger-
man word Weltpolitik ("world politics"). Determined that no decisions
be made anywhere in the world without the voice of Germany, the
emperor fished in all troubled waters and extended his undiplomatic arm
as far as possible. This activity was accompanied by a good many bluster-
ing speeches indicating ambitions which alarmed the other powers. Since
British interests were also far-flung, it was almost inevitable that the two
powers should clash. The most spectacular example of this clash was in
connection with the growing conflict between the British in South Africa
and the two independent Boer republics, the Orange Free State and the
Transvaal. At the end of 1895 Dr. Jameson, with the support of Cecil
Rhodes, premier of Cape Colony, and perhaps with the privy knowledge
of Joseph Chamberlain, colonial secretary, led an unsuccessful filibuster-
ing raid against the Boer city of Johannesburg. The news of this raised
a storm in Berlin. The alleged (and unfactual) racial kinship between
Germans and Boers, and the economic interests of Germany in the
Transvaal, were adduced as reasons for German intervention in the
area. Emperor William talked about sending German marines to South
Africa and was with difficulty persuaded by his advisers to limit his
activity to sending a telegram of congratulations and encouragement to President Kruger of the Transvaal. This telegram infuriated public opinion in Great Britain, and, though the two governments managed to deal with the matter with commendable coolness, Germanophobia in England and Anglophobia in Germany became significant factors in the general European picture.

Other examples can be adduced of the geographical extension of German foreign policy during these years. In 1895 the German government joined with the French and Russian in insisting that Japan abandon her demand for the Liaotung Peninsula and Port Arthur after her victory over China. This action emphasized the German emperor’s constant fear of Japan, “the yellow peril,” and also his dream of a continental alliance of France, Germany, and Russia. In 1897 in retaliation for the murder of two German missionaries in China, the Germans landed at Kiaochow, on the Shantung Peninsula, and by the following year had extracted a ninety-nine-year lease of that territory from the Chinese. This action was followed by similar Russian and British leases on the north China coast. In 1898, the year of the first German naval law, a German fleet with unknown orders appeared suddenly off Manila Bay just as Admiral Dewey was attacking the Spanish fleet during the Spanish-American War. In 1899 Germany made use of British preoccupation with the Boer War to demand and gain several of the islands in the Samoan group. In 1900 the German emperor, seizing on the murder of the German minister in Peking by the Boxers, a Chinese nationalist group, demanded and obtained the appointment of Field Marshal von Waldersee as the commander in chief of the international army sent to restore peace in the Chinese capital. It was upon this occasion that William wrote a new chapter in the history of gaucherie by instructing his forces to act like the Huns of old, thus giving enemy propagandists in two great wars material for unlimited copy.

Closer to home the Germans were also undertaking an active policy in the Ottoman Empire and the Middle East. The efforts of Marschall von Bieberstein, now German ambassador in Constantinople, to woo the Turks were gradually crowned with success. In 1898 William and his consort paid a second visit to the sultan. Then, advancing on Damascus, the emperor gave a mighty speech in which he described himself as “protector of Islam,” even though the great majority of members of that religion were subjects of Britain, Russia, or France. Another aspect of this diplomatic and economic advance was the scheme for a Berlin-to-Baghdad railway, a project which would have brought German influence uncomfortably close to India. In general, no stone was left unturned to make Germany both heard and unpopular in the world at large.
These years of the new century were decisive in outlining the future because it was during them that Germany repulsed several efforts by the British government to draw closer to her, even to the extent of a proposed alliance. Joseph Chamberlain appeared as the friend of Germany. Once again in agreement with the sentiments of Cecil Rhodes, Chamberlain favored an Anglo-German-American alliance and broached the subject to Emperor William and Bülow while they were visiting London in late 1899. Chamberlain went so far as to open the subject in a public speech at Leicester on November 30, which received much criticism in both England and Germany. The Germans, particularly Bülow and Holstein, were decidedly lukewarm about the matter but let negotiations continue for over a year. They felt that Britain was much more anxious for the arrangement than Germany. Thus they tried to extort more advantage from London, even to the point of insisting that Great Britain take on all three members of the Triple Alliance as her partners instead of allying with Germany alone. By the spring of 1901 the British were tired of the subject; Lord Salisbury, the prime minister, ended the negotiations and turned instead to Japan, with which Britain concluded an alliance the following year. In the years to come England moved continually closer to France and Russia, and all hope of a real Anglo-German rapprochement faded. It is of course impossible to speculate what would have been the result of such an alliance at this juncture, but one may criticize the rather cavalier manner with which the Germans treated overtures from so considerable a power as Great Britain.

After the turn of the century, in spite of boisterous utterances by Emperor William indicating confidence, the initiative in foreign policy slipped from Germany into the hands of her eventual enemies. Certainly the most striking development of these years was the flirtation between the two historical opponents, Great Britain and France, culminating in the Entente Cordiale of 1904. This relationship was frightening to Germany, especially in light of the Franco-Russian alliance. However, Russia was soon in trouble in the Far East, where she was being defeated by the Japanese. In reply Germany undertook a double-barreled and inconsistent policy. On the one hand, she offered her friendship to Russia with the opportunity for France to join the grouping, William's continental scheme; on the other hand, she challenged France in Morocco at a time when Russia was too concerned elsewhere to help her ally and also as a device to test the strength of the new Anglo-French relationship.

Gestures toward Russia began with aid, comfort, and coal to the Russian Baltic Sea fleet on its odyssey to the Far East to be destroyed by the Japanese at Tsushima. Emperor William, fearful of the possible rise of
Asiatic states, was willing to remain benevolent toward Russia while she was at war with Japan. The next year William encountered Tsar Nicholas II while the two were cruising in their yachts on the Baltic Sea. They met in 1905 near the island of Björkő—William in a sunny playful mood, Nicholas ending a disastrous war and fighting a serious revolution at home. William happened to have in his pocket a draft treaty calling for mutual aid between Germany and Russia in Europe and inviting France to adhere to the agreement. Nicholas signed the draft, but the two monarchs were much dismayed when, on their return home, their respective foreign offices would have nothing to do with the treaty; further, the French vetoed the idea out of hand. This abortive episode suggests the folly of placing impetuous and irresponsible monarchs at the head of great and powerful nations.

The first Moroccan crisis might have developed into a world war in 1905. As it turned out, it was a diplomatic triumph for France and a defeat for Germany, and also announced to the world that the Entente between Britain and France meant business. The position of Morocco was confused. Nominally independent, it bordered on French Algeria and caused the French a great deal of trouble from border raids of bandits and irregular detachments. Furthermore, France, Germany, Spain, and Italy all had considerable economic investment in Morocco, which they were anxious to safeguard. Finally, the strategic location of the area across from Gibraltar aroused British interest. In early 1905 France, under the direction of her active foreign minister, Théophile Delcassé, made an arrangement with the sultan of Morocco which was so binding that Morocco would have become the equivalent of a French protectorate. Germany was excluded from any participation in this arrangement. Therefore, Bülow and Holstein thought this would be a good moment to halt France’s advance. They persuaded the emperor to take a trip to Morocco, where he was to land at Tangier and treat the sultan as an independent sovereign with no reference to France. The visit was a fiasco. Landing at Tangier and bounding ashore, William was first faced by a nervous and restive horse, which almost threw him. He then rushed into the town and made a speech calling for an open-door policy with an equality of opportunity in Morocco for all nations. The reaction to this was a division of opinion within the French cabinet. Rouvier, the premier, wished to back down. He did not want to run the risk of war with Germany while Russia was in serious straits and before he was sure of the new English relationship. Delcassé, on the other hand, put full faith in Britain and wanted to push the advantage. Rouvier prevailed, and Delcassé resigned. So far the crisis had been a German victory.
Lengthy negotiations ensued and resulted in an agreement to hold an international conference partly at the instance of the American president, Theodore Roosevelt. Accordingly, the Algeciras conference was held in early 1906 at a little town in Spain across the bay from Gibraltar. The conference was a disappointment to Germany. Russia backed the French position; even Italy, a partner of Germany in the Triple Alliance, supported France; and most important, Great Britain stood consistently behind her new friend, France. An agreement was finally reached, which reaffirmed the independence of Morocco and granted France more influence there than any other power but not as much as she had tried to obtain by the earlier bilateral agreement. It was at least a moral victory for France. At home in Berlin it led to the forced resignation of Holstein and the beginning of the decline of Bülow’s influence over the emperor.

Once again, the initiative in international affairs passed to the anti-German cabinets in Europe. Between the Moroccan affair and the next major crisis, the leading event was the Anglo-Russian Entente which brought together France’s two friends and finally divided Europe into two opposed and apparently roughly equivalent groupings—the Triple Alliance of Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy; and the Triple Entente of Great Britain, France, and Russia.

A year after the Triple Entente came into existence, Europe was once more brought to the brink of war by the crisis which arose over the annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina by Austria-Hungary. In this episode Germany was not a primary agent and was content merely with supporting her Viennese partner and thus sharing in Russian anger. By virtue of the Treaty of Berlin of 1878 Austria-Hungary had garrisoned and administered the two Slavic provinces to her south. The Austrian foreign minister, Baron von Ahrenthal, decided to press for the complete annexation of the provinces and the ending of the fiction of Turkish sovereignty over them. He was impelled to this partly as a result of difficulties at home and a consequent need for a victory abroad, and also because he feared that the vigorous new Young Turk government might try to regain control of Turkey’s former territories. He arranged a meeting with the Russian foreign minister, Izvolski, at which Russia agreed not to object to the annexation if she could get permission from the powers to send her war vessels through the Straits from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean. Izvolski was still on his pilgrimage to the various capitals to obtain this permission when Ahrenthal announced unilaterally on October 6, 1908, the annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina to Austria-Hungary. This action caused consternation throughout Europe,
particularly in Serbia, which had designs on the two provinces in order to create a great south Slavic state and which looked to her big Slavic brother, Russia, for support. The Russian emperor seems not to have known about Izvolski’s share in the proceedings and to have forced him to repudiate the deal about the Straits. Germany’s part in the crisis was relatively minor. She was annoyed that she had not received prior information from her ally but nevertheless resolved to back Austria. Russia, still weak from the Japanese war and the revolution of 1905, was in no position to provoke a European war, especially as she was not at all sure of the position Great Britain would take, and thus had to back down. Austria won her last diplomatic victory. However, the rancor which had been sown in the hearts of the Russian leaders did not die. From this time until the outbreak of war in 1914, Russia was bitterly opposed to Austria’s aspirations in the Balkans and naturally included in her anger Germany, Austria’s ally.

Before the prewar diplomatic scene centered itself in the Balkan Peninsula after 1912, one more crisis occurred over the Moroccan question in 1911. By this time the leaders of German policy had changed. Bethmann-Hollweg had succeeded Bülow as chancellor, and Alfred von Kiderlen-Wächter, long influential in German policy, had become secretary of state for foreign affairs.

During the years since Algeciras French influence in Morocco had increased and, as a result of local uprisings in the spring of 1911, the French sent troops to the Moroccan capital. The German government objected to this as a violation of treaties; to show that they were serious, they dispatched a cruiser, the “Panther,” to stand off the harbor of Agadir on the Atlantic coast of Morocco. Neither the French nor the Germans wanted this crisis to develop into a war. The French were in fact prepared to offer Germany compensation elsewhere in Africa for a free hand in Morocco. The German price, however, looked too high to them. Tension was increased by a bellicose speech given by David Lloyd George at the Mansion House in London, demanding that Britain be consulted in the crisis. Negotiations followed and in November 1911 an agreement was signed by which France was permitted to do whatever she pleased in Morocco, even to the extent of establishing a protectorate, in return for the cession to Germany of a large piece of land in the Congo area adjacent to the German colony of Cameroons.

The panorama of foreign policy in the reign of William II is not an impressive one. Although Germany had meddled in areas all over the world and sought to assert herself everywhere, she was in a less secure position than in 1890. She had had to watch first France and Russia, then
Britain and France, then Britain and Russia draw closer to each other. She was beginning to talk of a policy of "encirclement" by the Triple Entente. Within her own alliance system the relationship with Italy was at best a tenuous one. Germany had only one secure friend, Austria-Hungary, a decadent empire rent with internal dissension. It was in this situation that Germany faced the series of crises in the Balkans which led directly into the war of 1914. The historian cannot help being impressed by the blindness of the German emperor and his favored advisers in establishing their priority of aims. This is not to suggest that they wanted a general war. No one did. However, an almost irresponsible attitude forced just those actions which would most irritate other powers. An example of this type of behavior occurred in 1912. Early in that year the British government sent its minister of war, Lord Haldane, to Berlin to explore the possibilities of reducing the tensions between the two nations, especially concerning naval and colonial problems. There was disagreement between German civilian and military officials. As usual, the emperor sided with his military advisers. The result was that while colonial problems appeared easy to settle, the question of the increasing German navy was insoluble. Thus the mission failed. Again, as in the case of the Chamberlain overtures a decade earlier, one cannot guess what the result might have been, but as in that case it is hard to avoid the feeling that this was another missed opportunity.

The major diplomatic interest of the years 1912 and 1913 revolved around the Balkan Peninsula, where two local wars stringently reduced the territory of Turkey in Europe and increased that of the Christian Balkan states. They also had the effect of baring, even more sharply than the Bosnian crisis had, the conflicting policies of Russia and Austria-Hungary in the area. Germany played a relatively small part in these events. Her main involvement with them was in two spheres: continued support of her ally, Austria, with consequent alienation of Russia; and her increasing penetration of the Ottoman Empire.

Although Germany on the whole backed up Austria in the various crises arising out of the Balkan wars (e.g., Austria's determination that Serbia should not receive a coastal strip), there is evidence to suggest that Germany was sometimes irritated at Austria's belligerent attitudes and on occasion did her best to curb Austrian demands. It is interesting to compare this behavior of the German leaders with that of the French who were doing much the same thing with their ally, Russia. In fact, during these years Great Britain, France, and Germany exerted a moderating influence on their allies, and there even appeared to be some sense of a concert of Europe operating at a higher level than the two
systems of alliance. This at least was the effort of Sir Edward Grey, British foreign secretary, and it was not without support in Berlin and Paris.

After her poor showing in the Balkan wars Turkey was resolved to improve the condition of her army and invited a German general to come to Constantinople and undertake this task, as she had earlier invited a British admiral to do the same for her navy. General Liman von Sanders was appointed and arrived in Turkey in the closing days of 1913. His arrival caused great disquiet in St. Petersburg, and Sazonov, the Russian foreign minister, protested violently about undue German influence in Turkey and in the Straits, always a sensitive spot to the Russians. Sazonov was right in his apprehension that Germany was becoming more and more influential in Turkey. This was a continuing process that had been developing ever since the accession of William II, but particularly since the Young Turk revolutions of 1908 and 1909. The appointment of Liman was really just an incidental aspect of a much broader matter, concerning which much light is still lacking. The affair threatened to become a real crisis, but was finally settled when Liman was promoted in the Prussian army and therefore received the rank of field marshal in the Turkish army. Thus he had too much rank to be in command of the corps at Constantinople, the point about which the Russians were most exercised. He became instead inspector general of the Turkish army.

The spring of 1914 was a pleasant moment in this period of "international anarchy." It looked as if this were to be a peaceful year. The British and the Germans were agreeing on some outstanding problems. For example, the troublesome matter of the future of the Portuguese colonial empire seemed to become manageable. Britain and Germany reached an agreement on the question of the Berlin-to-Baghdad railway. Plans were made for Emperor William to take a cruise through Norwegian waters during July and for the French president, Raymond Poincaré, to pay a state visit to the tsar. Upon this peaceful scene there fell the news, on June 28, that Archduke Francis Ferdinand, heir to the thrones of Austria-Hungary, and his wife had been murdered while on a visit to Sarajevo, capital of Bosnia. This was the event whose repercussions plunged Europe, and eventually the world, into war within five weeks.

Probably more ink has been spilled on the crisis of July 1914 than on any other similar event in history. The clause of the Treaty of Versailles of 1919 which gave Germany and her allies the full responsibility for launching the war on a peace-loving world has led to the
publication of thousands of pages of documents and memoirs and thousands more of analysis and interpretation. There is no reason to reassess the crisis here. An attempt will be made to describe only Germany's immediate connection with it and to make some judgment on the actions of the German government.

Emperor William was shocked and angered by the news of the murder of his friend and hunting companion, the archduke. He was thus prepared to receive encouragingly an emissary from Vienna on July 5, who was sent to ascertain the German view of the matter. The emissary, Count Hoyos, was received by both William and Chancellor Bethmann. In his message Count Berchtold, Austro-Hungarian foreign minister, described the continuing barrage of anti-Austrian activity emanating from ambitious Serbia. Although the murder had been committed by a Bosnian, an Austrian national, there was little doubt that it had been inspired from Belgrade. Berchtold felt that this outrage, commanding as it must the reprobation of the world, was an admirable opportunity for ending the Serbian nuisance once and for all, and that it was time to give little Serbia such a spanking that she would never again indulge in anti-Austrian gestures. Emperor William agreed to this and informed the Austrian government that Germany would back any action that Austria might see fit to take. He then left for his summer cruise, clearly of the opinion that this crisis would be a local one which Austria could handle with her own means.

The next Austrian step was postponed for almost three weeks. It took the form, on July 23, of an ultimatum so sternly worded that complete compliance with it would have meant abrogation of sovereignty by Serbia. Upon news of this, Russia, acting as the Slavic big brother, indicated her solidarity with Serbia and probably encouraged Serbia to make a conciliatory but evasive answer, which Austria declared unsatisfactory. At this point the crisis ceased to be a local Balkan problem and became a general European one, with Russia and Austria as the protagonists. Britain and France entered the picture as allies of Russia, Germany as the ally of Austria. Sir Edward Grey proposed an international conference to deal with the problem. Germany's attitude toward this was that a conference was not suitable for a discussion of an affair that concerned Austria's honor, e.g., the crisis with Serbia, but that one might be possible on the subject of the Austro-Russian friction. In the meantime Bethmann, convinced at last of the seriousness of the crisis, tried to dampen Austria's aggressiveness; but it was too late. On July 28, 1914, Austria declared war on Serbia.

Austria's impulsive declaration led into the third phase of the crisis,
the phase in which the military leaders quickly took precedence over the civilian diplomats, especially in Germany and Russia. At that time it was military doctrine that mobilization meant war and that it was crucial to start mobilization before the prospective enemy. Furthermore, the various general staffs had worked out strategic plans of campaign for various contingencies, and these plans often had serious diplomatic implications. This was particularly true in the case of Germany. The German General Staff, under the leadership of its former chief, Count Alfred von Schlieffen, had worked out a plan for a simultaneous war against France and Russia. This plan envisaged the defeat of France before Russia, on the theory that France with her greater efficiency would be ready to fight sooner than Russia and thus was the greater menace. It therefore became essential to know what attitude France planned to take. Also the plan envisaged the attack on France through Belgium and Luxemburg, in spite of the guaranteed neutrality of those two states. In Russia the generals, knowing the inefficiency of their army and the enormous size of the country with its lack of railroads, were sure to press for the earliest possible mobilization in order to be at the least possible disadvantage. Both William II and Nicholas II were under severe and increasing pressure to order mobilization in spite of the reluctance of both to invite a situation sure to lead to war.

In Russia the problem was almost ridiculous. The tsar gave in to pressure and ordered general mobilization on July 29. However, when he heard later the same day that Germany was trying to restrain Austria, he countermanded his order and called for mobilization against Austria only. He was informed that there were no plans for such a situation. So on July 30 general mobilization was once again ordered.

On the following day Germany sent a twelve-hour ultimatum to Russia demanding that she cease mobilizing on the German frontier. At the same time she demanded to know what France was proposing to do. On August 1, 1914, the French replied evasively that they would be guided by their own interests and a few hours later mobilized. A few minutes later Germany did so too, and an hour later declared war on Russia. The next day the Schlieffen plan was placed in operation, Luxemburg invaded, and Belgium invited unsuccessfully by the Germans to remain neutral in spite of invasion. On August 3 Germany declared war on France, and on the following day Great Britain, impelled both by her commitments to France and by the violation of Belgian neutrality, declared war on Germany. The world was at war; in Sir Edward Grey's famous phrase, "the lights had gone out all over Europe."

Few scholars today would agree with the war-guilt clause of the Treaty of Versailles, that Germany and her allies were exclusively guilty
of the war. On the other hand, Germany participated with the other nations in the indirect causes of the war: militarism, commercial rivalry, imperialism, and national chauvinism. On a more immediate level, the German government erred in granting so readily to Austria the so-called blank check of support on July 5. Wiser men might well have seen the implications of Austria's determination to chastise Serbia. Germany might well have participated to a greater degree in the efforts of Grey and others to prolong negotiations. She also might have restrained the enthusiasm of her military leaders. Yet in the long view it appears that if a war had not broken out at this moment, it very likely would have soon thereafter. Germany's tragedy was the world's tragedy.