# CHAPTER 3

# *The First World War*

LIKE THE DECKS of a ship floundering in heavy weather, the European political scene shifted and heaved uncertainly in the decade preceding the outbreak of the First World War. The great powers stumbled from one diplomatic crisis to the next as they contended, not very adroitly, with the demands that one of their number, Germany, was making for a "place in the sun." To complicate matters, the continuing decline of a former great power, the Ottoman Empire, opened a dangerous power vacuum in the Balkans. Nationalist animosities took on increasing virulence as opinion makers across the Continent pilloried rival nations and warned of imminent war. Many Europeans began to believe that some sort of military conflict was inevitable, and some actually pined for it. What they ultimately got, however, was something almost no one had bargained for: a war of such scope, duration, and devastation that it completely altered the political and even the cultural landscape of twentieth-century Europe.

## THE RIGIDIFICATION OF THE ALLIANCE SYSTEM

The year 1905 was crucial in the unfolding of a new European diplomacy. The events of that year decided that the European state system would be divided into two opposing blocs. Alliances between the great powers of Europe had been in existence since the nineteenth century. Primary among them was the Triple Alliance among Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy; this was followed in the 1890s by the Russo-French alliance. But some flexibility, some room for maneuvering between alliances and powers, had remained. Although after Bismarck's fall the Reinsurance Treaty, through which he had tried to maintain good relations with Russia, had not been renewed, collaboration between Germany and Russia, chiefly by means of an assumed friendship and an actual familial relationship between the tsar and William II, had not entirely ceased. Most important, Great Britain was not bound by any alliance.

The rigidification of the existing compacts in 1905 did not occur overnight.

The Baghdad Railroad. German and Turkish officials celebrate the launching of the enterprise.

Great Britain had been surprised by the reaction which the Boer War had aroused on the Continent. The Boers clearly enjoyed the sympathy of the peoples on the Continent, and English defeats were viewed with a certain glee. The Boer War had created a somewhat contradictory but nonetheless unfavorable image of Great Britain: ruthless in its pursuit of worldly treasures on the one hand, decadent on the other. To avoid a common stand of the great powers against them and to reinforce the security of their empire, the English needed to abandon their policy of "splendid isolation" and seek the backing of a great continental power.

The most likely potential partner of Britain was Germany, which was stronger than Britain's closest continental neighbor, France. Moreover, the interests of Great Britain and Russia, France's ally, clashed in Persia, on the northern frontier of India, and in China. However, if Britain was unpopular in Germany, Germany was no less unpopular in Britain. Perhaps the German emperor seriously believed that Germany wanted nothing but its deserved "place in the sun." He had certainly convinced many of his subjects that this was the case. But with possessions spread out all over the globe, the British saw the German advances into Africa, China, and the South Seas as the actions of a spoiled and brutal young man who wanted to grab everything he could lay his hands on. In the eyes of the leaders of British policy, two actions of the German government posed a special danger: the construction of a powerful navy and the financing and building of the Baghdad Railway. When the German naval program began, there was probably little awareness of what its later consequences would be.



Because sea power was regarded as essential for effective participation in world politics, the navy soon became popular among the German bourgeoisie; in contrast to the predominantly aristocratic officers of the army, naval officers came mainly from bourgeois families. The popular backing for the navy was efficiently promoted by the secretary of the navy, Admiral von Tirpitz, who established a special office which edited pamphlets, helped to organize navy leagues, and arranged meetings where speakers discussed the importance of naval power. This office was the forerunner of all later propaganda ministries. In 1898 the Reichstag had sanctioned a navy bill which was a new departure for Germany in that it proposed not only cruisers which might defend the German coast but also battleships fit for combat on the open sea; the bill provided for the building of eleven battleships and five first-class cruisers by 1905. The German Navy envisaged here was still small. However, two years later, in 1900, Tirpitz carried through the adoption of a second bill, which would expand the building program, calling for the construction of thirty-eight battleships to be completed in twenty years. The anti-British tendency of this second bill was evident. Tirpitz's goal was a fleet of such strength that the British would hesitate to attack Germany.

Likewise, the German project for a railroad to Baghdad developed from innocuous beginnings into an enterprise with dangerous political consequences. The capital needed and the financial risks involved were so large that the Deutsche Bank, the German financial house interested in the undertaking, obtained concessions for the project from the Turkish government in 1899 almost by default of other competitors. The leaders of the Deutsche Bank tried without success to obtain the cooperation of financiers of other countries for this enterprise. The only serious opponents of the project were the Russians. The French supported the Germans, and the British raised no objections; both Great Britain and France were anxious to bar Russian expansion in the Near East and to involve Germany in the preservation of Turkey. However, their attitude changed when, almost unavoidably, the construction of the railroad gave Germany economic and then political control in Turkey.

If these German enterprises lowered the attractiveness of an understanding with Germany, all such attempts were cut off by the attitude of the German political leaders. British feelers, particularly those of the colonial secretary, Joseph Chamberlain, received a very cool reception. The German statesmen in power, especially Chancellor Bernhard von Bülow (1849–1929) and his political adviser, Friedrich von Holstein, felt sure that Britain could turn to no other power. Thus, Germany could refuse to be satisfied with an agreement that merely delimited German and British colonial interests and wait until the time was ripe to demand a defensive alliance.

But the British government, having no intention of going that far, turned to France, and the result was the Entente Cordiale, concluded on April 8, 1904. Formally, this treaty was an agreement on all the issues concerning colonies that

had occasioned disputes between Great Britain and France; the chief points were that France abandoned all its claims in Egypt and Britain recognized that France had a dominating interest in Morocco and promised diplomatic support of French plans for achieving control of Morocco. The marquess of Lansdowne (1845–1927), the British foreign secretary who concluded this agreement, always maintained that the treaty had no aim except that of moderating the tensions which had arisen from colonial conflicts. But a year later what was a limited temporary agreement had become a close political partnership.

The developments which took place in 1905 were preceded by a change in the position of Russia. Throughout the nineteenth century the contrast between Great Britain and Russia had been a basic factor in European foreign policy; it was axiomatic that "bear and whale could never come together." Significantly, when the British government abandoned the policy of "splendid isolation," the first agreement it concluded was an alliance which recognized Japan's special interest in Korea. But the primary British interest in this treaty was to strengthen the barrier against any further Russian advance in the Far East. When the Russo-Japanese War broke out two years later, the Russians feared that Great Britain might enter the war on the Japanese side—especially after an incident at Dogger Bank in the North Sea in which Russian ships sailing from the Baltic to the Far East had mistakenly fired on British trawlers. Consequently, the Russians began to set great store on a benevolent neutrality of Germany and began to seek German support. This situation appeared to the German statesmen an ideal opportunity to reassert German predominance on the Continent. They persuaded themselves that because Russia, involved in the Far East, could not come to the assistance of France, this was the right moment to humiliate the French and show them that their Entente Cordiale with Great Britain was without value. They believed that German superiority and French helplessness would be strikingly demonstrated if they halted the French penetration into Morocco.

## THE CRISES OF 1905–1914

### *The First and Second Moroccan Crises*

The first Moroccan crisis started when William II, on a Mediterranean trip in March 1905, debarked briefly in Tangier and solemnly declared that the Germans were willing to maintain the independence of Morocco. When the French protested, the Germans demanded an international conference to adjudicate the dispute, fully expecting the conference to demonstrate France's isolation and impotence. The French at first rejected this demand but eventually agreed to the conference after being assured of British backing for their position. Thus, when the conference convened in the Spanish port of Algeciras in January 1906, it was not France but Germany that was in an almost isolated position. A test vote on a minor question revealed that Russia, France, Britain, Italy, and even the United States all sided with France; only Austria-Hungary voted with Germany. This suggested that if Germany decided to unleash a war with France, it would now be opposed by every great power but Austria. Chancellor von Bülow realized that Germany had to give in. The final agreement was couched in diplomatic language, but Germany's defeat was evident: France would be the dominant power in a nominally independent Morocco. More important, France could be assured of not standing alone against an increasingly aggressive Germany. Indeed, the conference was significant primarily for what it revealed about the diplomatic constellation in Europe. At Algeciras the powers that would confront one another in the First World War found themselves for the first time grouped in opposing camps.

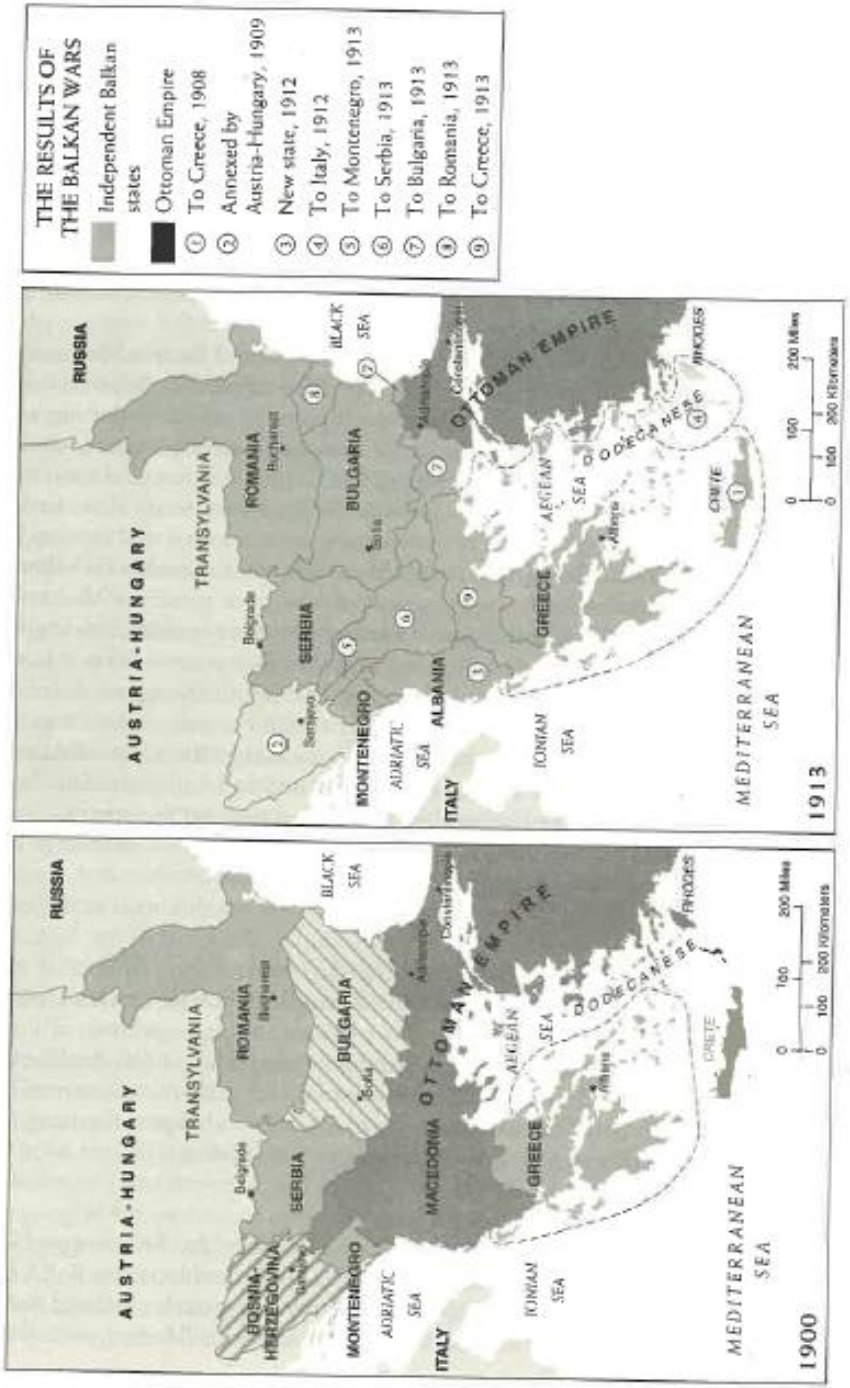


Germany, however, did not fully grasp the implications of the first Moroccan crisis and in the summer of 1911 again tried to bully France, thereby provoking a second Moroccan crisis and suffering a new diplomatic defeat. Following an outbreak of internal struggles in Morocco, Germany dispatched a gunboat to the Moroccan port of Agadir, allegedly to protect German commercial interests threatened by France's intervention to suppress the disruptions. This move alarmed the British more than the French since London worried that Germany might try to establish a naval base at Agadir, which could threaten Gibraltar. Lloyd George delivered a stern warning to Germany in a speech at Mansion House on July 21, 1911. Although the French government consented to negotiate with the Germans, it was unprepared to yield much since it knew it had the support of Britain. In the agreement that was eventually signed, France gained a free hand in Morocco and Germany received a part of the French Congo connecting the German Cameroons with the Congo River, a small compensation for Berlin. Again, moreover, Germany had failed to intimidate the French or to drive a wedge between the Entente powers; on the contrary, its gunboat diplomacy had succeeded only in confirming the other nations' perception of Germany as a dangerously aggressive new power.

Threatening as the Moroccan crises were, the tensions that soon exploded into the First World War developed not in colonial Africa but in the Balkan region, where the Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires were competing to take over domination from the declining Ottoman Empire, against whose long rule the various Balkan peoples were also rebelling. A simple partition of the Ottoman possessions was not possible because Germany, hoping to dominate the entire region behind a façade of Turkish control, had made the maintenance of the Ottoman Empire the cornerstone of its policy. This change in Germany's role constituted a new and dangerous element in the situation.

### *The Bosnian Crisis*

After the humiliation suffered in the war against Japan, the Russian government was eager for a success in foreign policy. The Slavic brethren in the Balkans were popular with the Russian public, and Russian ruling circles believed that a policy favoring independence of the Balkan nations would strengthen the






authority of the tsar and weaken the trends toward parliamentarianism and democratic government. Quick action seemed appropriate because in July 1908 a revolution had taken place in the Ottoman Empire; the tyrannical sultan Abdul-Hamid II had been forced to abdicate, and the Young Turks, advocates of modernization and parliamentary government, had come to power. Concessions from a Turkey strengthened by reforms would be difficult to obtain. Hence in September 1908 the Russian foreign minister, Aleksandr Izvolsky (1856–1919), set out to visit the courts of the European great powers, hoping to obtain their permission to open the Dardanelles to Russian warships, a move which would strengthen Russian influence in Turkey and in the Balkans. Izvolsky's first stop was at Buchlau, in Bohemia, where he met the Austrian foreign minister, Baron Alois von Aehrenthal. The exact nature of the exchange between Izvolsky and Aehrenthal has never become entirely clear because the accounts of the two ministers diverge widely. However, there can be little doubt that Aehrenthal promised to raise no objections against the opening of the Dardanelles to Russian warships. As a quid pro quo, Izvolsky agreed not to oppose Austrian annexation of the Turkish provinces of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which Austria-Hungary had occupied since the Congress of Berlin. Aehrenthal was a clever and ruthless diplomat and Izvolsky was not his equal. For while Izvolsky continued his round of visits to the European capitals, seeking to work out a general agreement on the opening of the Dardanelles, the Austrian government, on October 6, proclaimed the annexation of Bosnia and Herzogovina. One day earlier, in collusion with Austria, Bulgaria—hitherto under the sovereignty of the sultan—had declared its full independence. The crisis had come about before Izvolsky could get agreement from the other great powers, and he had to return to St. Petersburg empty-handed. Austria-Hungary had strengthened its position in the Balkan area without the Russians' receiving any compensation. In order to reassert Russian influence in Balkan affairs, and also driven by passionate hatred of Aehrenthal, Izvolsky tried in every way to prevent international recognition of Austria's annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Turks, under German pressure, accepted the annexation when they were offered financial compensation. The country which was most indignant over the Austrian action was Serbia. Because the peoples of Bosnia and Herzegovina were primarily South Slavs, the Serbs felt that they, not the Austrians, ought to rule these provinces. Thus, the crisis dragged on. Encouraged by Russian backing, Serbia made military preparations, and Austria followed suit. Finally, in March 1909, the German government sent a sharp note to Russia demanding that it abandon its support of Serbia and recognize Austria's annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Still too weak to risk a war against the great European powers, Russia gave in. The crisis was over.

The Bosnian crisis has frequently been considered a rehearsal of the crisis which ended with the outbreak of the First World War. It is indeed true that

Germany tried to repeat in 1914 what it had succeeded in doing in 1908–1909. But in 1914 Russia was not willing to back down.

In any case the Bosnian crisis made Germany and Russia direct opponents and ended all ideas of a German-Russian alliance. Germany's reaction was almost automatic. It tried to escape from isolation by moving closer to Great Britain. This shift in policy was connected with a change in the German government. Whereas Chancellor von Bülow had been anti-British and chiefly interested in an alliance with Russia, Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg, who succeeded Bülow in 1909, accepted Russian hostility as inevitable and directed his policy toward cooperation with Great Britain.

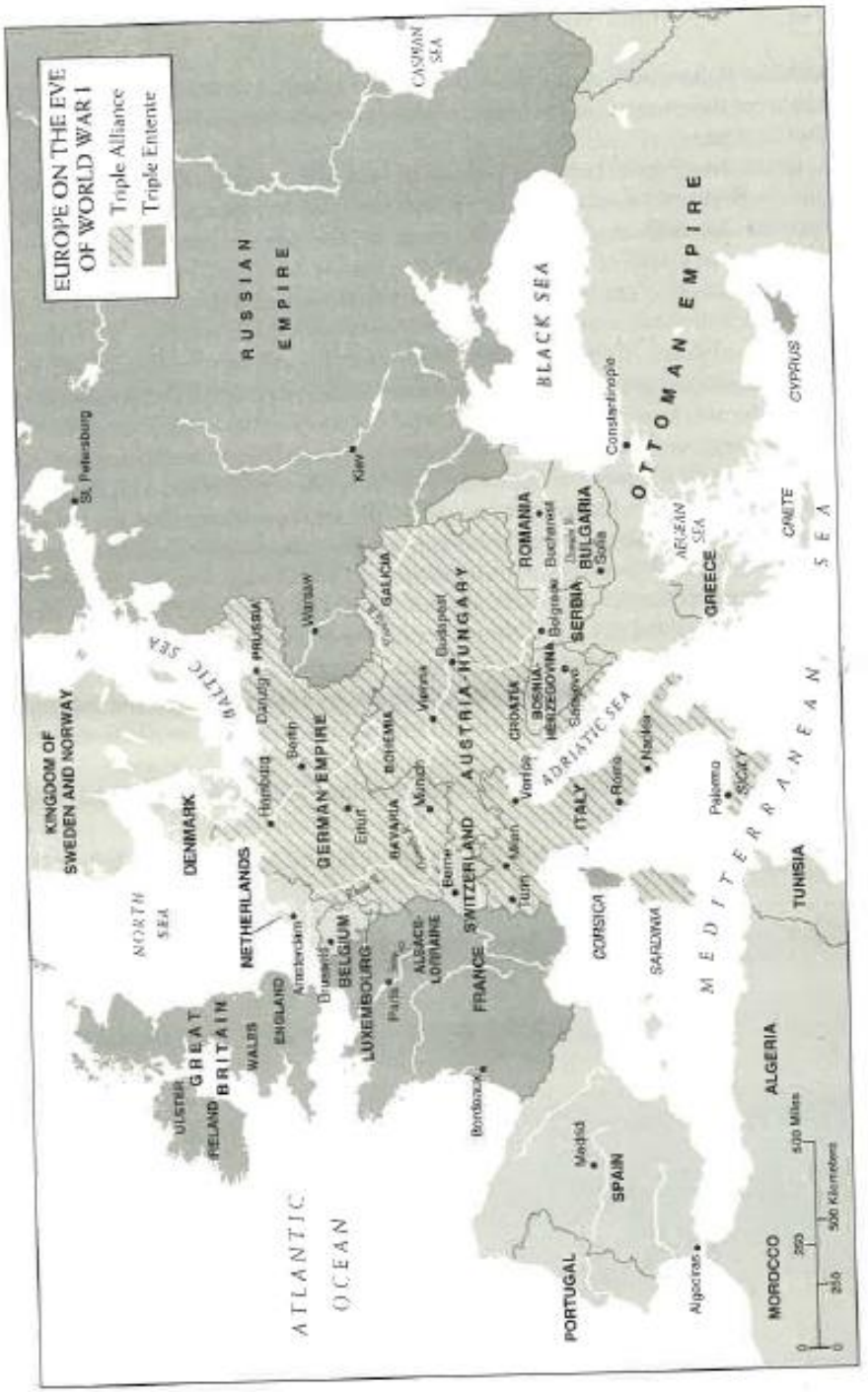
*War and Crisis in the Balkans*

The possibility of avoiding war if tensions continued became increasingly less likely. After the Agadir crisis the focus of tension shifted to the east. From 1912 on the affairs of the Ottoman Empire and the national aspirations of the Balkan nations evoked one crisis after the other. The prelude was the war which began in September 1911 between Turkey and Italy. All the great powers had recognized that Tripoli was in the Italian sphere of interest; when France finally absorbed Morocco, the Italian government decided to take action and proclaimed the annexation of Tripoli. Turkey answered with a declaration of war against Italy. The Italians won a quick victory, but in the meantime the Tripolitan War triggered action in the Balkans. Serbia and Bulgaria believed that if they did not take action before the end of Turkey's conflict with Italy, they might miss an opportunity for driving the Turks out of Europe. They succeeded in getting the support of Montenegro and Greece, and war against Turkey broke out in October 1912. The Turkish troops in the Balkans were defeated in a number of battles in which the Bulgarian and Serbian soldiers proved themselves to be excellent warriors.

But a diplomatic settlement was much more difficult to achieve than military victory. There was dissension among the victors about the drawing of the frontiers after the war had assured the end of Turkish rule in Europe. The two areas about which disposition had to be made were Macedonia and Albania.

Bulgaria, Greece, and Serbia all demanded parts of Macedonia, and the claims of Greece and Bulgaria were particularly irreconcilable because both were anxious to control the northern coast of the Aegean Sea. The result was a second Balkan war, in which Greece, Serbia, Romania, and Turkey rallied against Bulgaria. The outcome of this war determined that only a very small part of Macedonia fell to Bulgaria. Most of it was divided between Serbia and Greece, and the Turks regained Adrianople. The division of Macedonia among three powers remained a cause for tension and conflict among them almost until the end of the Second World War.

The Serbs were less successful in their demand for Albanian territory which would give them a direct access to the Adriatic Sea. The great powers, meeting



with the Balkan nations and Turkey in London, forced Serbia and Montenegro to accept the creation of an independent Albania. Serbia remained cut off from the Adriatic.

In the meetings in London, Russia had backed the claims of Serbia, whereas Austria-Hungary advocated those of Bulgaria and together with Italy sharply opposed the Serbian demand for access to the Adriatic Sea. To underline the seriousness with which they looked upon the situation, both—Russia and Austria-Hungary—made some military preparations. Great Britain and Germany cooperated to obtain a peaceful solution of the conflict. Nevertheless, the Balkan wars accumulated new explosive material which the compromise worked out by the great powers in London concealed rather than eliminated. Turkey, in need of military reorganization, called in a German general, Otto Liman von Sanders, but this move evoked violent Russian protests because it appeared to be a further step in the establishment of German control over Turkey. Both Russia and Austria indicated that in the negotiations about the final resettlement of the Balkan wars they should have received stronger support from their respective friends, Great Britain and Germany. Consequently, in both Britain and Germany the government leaders felt that their alliances might be endangered if in the next emergency they did not give stronger support to their allies. But the most dangerous consequence of the Balkan wars was that all the resentment of Serbian nationalism was now focused on the Habsburg monarchy. The Serbs had considered the Austrian annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1908 a blow

A German military maneuver in 1913. Note the use of cavalry, which proved almost useless in the real war.



to Serbia's aspirations to become the home of all South Slavs. Now, in 1913, Austria-Hungary had again been the chief obstacle to Serbia's ambitions and had deprived it of the fruits of victory: access to the Adriatic Sea. To the nationalistic Serbs the Habsburg monarchy was an old, evil monster which prevented their nation from becoming a great and powerful state. On June 28, 1914, a young Serbian nationalist, Gavrilo Princip, assassinated the heir to the Habsburg monarchy, the archduke Francis Ferdinand, and his wife at Sarajevo.

## THE OUTBREAK OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

The events of the five weeks between the assassination of the archduke Francis Ferdinand and the outbreak of the First World War have been more carefully investigated than almost any others in world history. An endless number of books and articles have reviewed and probed all aspects of the question of responsibility for the outbreak of the war: whether the Serbian government had knowledge of the plans for the assassination of the archduke; whether Germany encouraged Austria-Hungary to take action against Serbia and deliberately instigated a general war in 1914; whether France believed this crisis would be a favorable opportunity for starting a war in order to regain Alsace-Lorraine and therefore stiffened the attitude of its Russian ally; whether military requirements restricted and eliminated the freedom of decision of the political leaders; and whether British policy was mistaken in not taking a clear stand. On this last point, the British historian Niall Ferguson has argued that Sir Edward Grey, Britain's foreign secretary, unnecessarily antagonized the Germans by taking an all-too-clear stance in favor of France. Had Grey worked diplomatically to clear a more prominent place for the Germans at the table of world power, Ferguson's argument goes, the First World War and all the catastrophes it brought in its wake might have been averted. This is an intriguing proposition, but like all the other "what if?" alternative scenarios surrounding the outbreak of World War I, it remains pure speculation.

At any rate, it is probable that the responsible leaders of the Serbian government did not know about the plans for the attempt on the life of the archduke. On the other hand, the assassination was the work not of an individual but of a group of Bosnian and Serbian nationalists, who were encouraged and promoted by a Serbian secret society, the Black Hand, in which the chief of the intelligence department of the Serbian general staff was a leading figure. However, when in an ultimatum of July 23, 1914, the Austrian government accused Serbian government officials of being involved in the plot, it had no proof, based its accusation on falsified documents, and did not mention the Black Hand, specifying only individuals and organizations that in truth had nothing to do with the assassination. Thus, the assassination was consciously used by the Austrian government for the purposes of power politics: to remove the threat which Serbia represented to the existence of the Habsburg monarchy. Further proof that this