



European Diplomacy, Thought, and Culture

The 19th century presaged the 20th in a number of ways. The diplomacy of century's end—and the changes that occurred in this field—was crucial in the coming of World War I. The thought and culture paved the way for the new century.

The Diplomatic Universe of Otto von Bismarck

The diplomatic relations of the late 19th century were dominated by Bismarck. In examining these relations, the principles underlying his moves, and the alterations made in his assumptions may be found clues for the coming of the conflict that forever changed the world—World War I .

Bismarck knew that France would never be reconciled to its loss Alsace and Lorraine after the Franco-Prussian War (Bismarck had not wanted to annex these provinces, but the Prussian generals forced him to agree). At the same time, knowing Germany's limitations, he did not aim at world power as his successors apparently did.

What Bismarck feared most for Germany, and what he constantly tried to avoid, was his country's being caught between France and Russia, i.e., a two-front war. This was his cardinal principle because he did not believe that Germany could win such a war. In practice, this meant keeping France and Russia separated. However, it was in Russia's long term interest to ally with



France, because a conflict with Austria-Hungary over the Balkans would probably break out at some point. Bismarck feared that Austria would draw Germany into such a conflict. The Austrian alliance was fundamental for Germany because both shared (geographically) Central Europe and made a formidable military bloc. In order to draw Russia into the orbit, Bismarck, a former ambassador to Russia, understood the Russian mentality and played on Russia's fear of revolution to keep that country apart from France, still considered the continent's arch-revolutionary.

Not only did Bismarck seek to keep France and Russia separated but he aimed to isolate France diplomatically because of its enduring enmity to Germany—and he succeeded.

In 1879, Bismarck contracted an alliance with Austria-Hungary (the Dual Alliance). This was the fundamental instrument of German foreign policy. Not only were the two countries ruled by Germans, but the lines of communications in case of war were ideal. Austria needed the German alliance because it was having problems in the Balkans with the Slavs in its Empire, and Russia was friendly with Serbia. Bismarck, however, determined not to be conditioned by Austria and made the comment that the Balkans were not worth the bones of a dead Prussian grenadier. While Bismarck was in power, Germany called the shots in the alliance.

Mindful of the need to perpetuate the irrational fear the Russians had for revolution, identified with the French—in 1881, Germany, Russia, and Austria-



Hungary came together in a combination whose name betrays its ideological origin: the Three Emperors' League

(<http://www.encyclopedia.com/html/T/ThreeE1mp.asp>). This arrangement, however, would be undermined by tension between Russia and Austria-Hungary.

In the meantime, Bismarck proceeded further in his aim of isolating France. In 1882—after a squabble between Italy and France over which country would gain control of Tunisia resulted in an Italian loss—the Italians joined the Germans and the Austrians in a new alliance. The Triple Alliance (Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy) would also prove to be unstable because of the ancient enmity and competition between the Austrians and the Italians. Bismarck required the Italians to join in an Austrian alliance if they wished to ally with the Germans so the Italians put aside their distaste for the Austrians. Moreover, Bismarck wished to complete the circle around France by seeking an alliance with Britain. Still in the “splendid isolation” period in which it shunned alliances, the British refused, but warm relations prevailed between them and the Germans while the ancient cool ones marked the British-French relationship. Thus, Bismarck succeeded in isolating the French diplomatically and made Berlin the hub of the European diplomatic system.

Symptom of Malaise: The Reinsurance Treaty

In 1887 the anomaly of Russia being in the same alliance with Austria ended. When the Three Emperors' League expired and came up for renewal,



the Russians refused to do so. The major reason for this refusal was continued Russian-Austrian competition in the Balkans.

Bismarck anticipated that eventually the Russians and the French would ally if Germany allowed Russia to escape from the German orbit. In case of war between Austria and Russia, Germany had a treaty that made it likely that it would support Austria (all of these alliances were defensive, stating that one country would help another only if attacked, but who exactly is responsible for a war is generally unclear and hence the doubt, but this was mostly theoretical); if Germany supported Austria in a Russian war, as seemed certain, Russia would need allies, and the best one was France because that would force the Germans to split their army in order to fight a two-front war. In this way, the worst case scenario for Bismarck would come to pass: Germany having to fight two major enemies on two widely-separated fronts. In a sense, German policy would be dependent on what Austria did, because if Austria acted in an aggressive manner, it could, in effect, force Germany into a conflict.

In 1887, as a last-ditch measure after the Russians left the Three Emperors' League, Bismarck negotiated the Reinsurance Treaty with Russia, a good symptom of a crack in Bismarck's diplomatic wall against France. The Reinsurance Treaty stated that Germany would not attack Russia. On the surface, this treaty did not contradict the alliance Germany had with Austria because Germany was bound to come to Austria's aid only if Russia attacked Austria, not if Austria attacked Russia. With the Reinsurance Treaty, Bismarck



kept Russia tied to Germany and, in effect, warned Austria against being too aggressive and provoking a Balkan war.

However, German diplomats did see a contradiction between the Reinsurance Treaty and Germany's obligations to Austria under the Dual Alliance. What if—as usually happens in the real world—it was difficult or impossible to determine who was at fault for the beginning of a war with Austria and Russia? Bismarck saw no difficulty: he would determine Germany's policy then, but others did see a problem. The Reinsurance Treaty had a three-year term. Bismarck's resignation in 1890 coincided with the expiration of the treaty, and his successor did not renew it.

The Collapse of Bismarck's System

If the German diplomacy before 1890 was marked by brilliance, after that date clumsiness characterized it. The Germans did not work hard enough to keep Russia in their orbit, and, as foreseen by Bismarck, the Russians allied with the French in 1893.

The Germans also did not reassure Britain on the building of a large fleet and, in fact, engaged in a naval arms race with them. This alarmed and alienated the British, who now sought allies. The British and the French had been enemies for centuries and were major competitors for colonies but, finding themselves threatened by the Germans, everything changed. In 1898, the British and the French came close to a war provoked by their colonial expansion in what



is known as the “Fashoda Incident” (in the Sudan, see

<http://www.cusd.chico.k12.ca.us/~bsilva/projects/scramble/fashoda.htm>).

However, they realized that it was not in their interest to fight a war for colonies while both were threatened by Germany. They came to an agreement over Fashoda, with France backing down. More importantly, over the next few years the British and the French worked out all their colonial problems, with one or the other giving up territory in one part of the world while gaining territory in another part of the world.

In short, with their colonial issues worked out, the British and the French could reach a general agreement in Europe. This they did and in 1904 when they signed an Entente (the word Entente is French for “Understanding”; this was not a hard and fast treaty but it turned out to be more durable than the Triple Alliance). In 1907, the British and the Russians also signed an Entente, giving rise to the Triple Entente, the famous grouping confronting the Triple Alliance of Germany, Austria, and Italy. But Italy, also facing problems with the Austrians, was not solidly in that group and drifted toward the Entente while formally remaining in the Triple Alliance.

By the beginning of the 20th century, instead of France being isolated, Germany was encircled, being able to count solidly only on Austria—which was in internal disarray. Bismarck’s system was in shambles.

The Schlieffen Plan



In order to confront the new diplomatic lineup, the Germans ceased to rely on diplomacy and turned to military means. They evolved a plan to meet a possible two-front war not by splitting their army into two, but through the Schlieffen Plan (<http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/FWWschlieffenP.htm>). Alfred von Schlieffen's plan exploited the differing rates of mobilization of the French, Germans, and Russians. France and Germany, being modern industrialized states, mobilized quickly; Russia, only beginning to industrialize, would mobilize at a much slower pace. In case war broke out, Schlieffen's idea was to concentrate the overwhelming part of the German army (about 90%) on the right wing facing northeastern France. The Germans could afford to do this because the Russians, unable to mobilize fully and quickly, would not constitute much of a threat to Germany in the short term. Schlieffen counted on beating the French quickly, after which the Germans shift their army east and defeat the Russians before they had mobilized fully, and winning a quick victory. Fearing that the French forts would hold them up, the Germans counted on going through Belgium (and Holland at first, although this changed) to avoid being bogged down by those forts. Belgium had been neutralized in an agreement to which Germany had subscribed, so the Schlieffen Plan contemplated violating that agreement. Later on the Schlieffen Plan was modified and the right wing was weakened despite Schlieffen's dying words in 1913: "Don't weaken the right wing."



The Schlieffen plan is a good example of how technical considerations can drive policy if a country is not careful. For example, if a crisis broke out involving Germany and Russia, the Germans had to attack France first, even if it was not involved. That is because, if the German army was concentrated on the Russian front, it could not turn around and apply the Schlieffen Plan and France could attack Germany in the rear. In the various diplomatic crises, the Germans were therefore ready to attack the French, even if those crises involved the Balkans. In fact, the Germans did not even develop an alternative plan to concentrate their army against the Russians if a war did break out that did not initially involve the French. Moreover, since the plan took advantage of the differing rates of mobilization, when Russian industrialization went further (remember that it was increasing by leaps and bounds), the Germans could no longer apply their military strategy and would truly be caught in an extremely dangerous two-front war, as Bismarck had envisaged. Many Germans believed a war with France and Russia inevitable and, therefore, it was better as far as they were concerned if the conflict broke out sooner rather than later because then they could apply their plan and have a better chance of a quick victory.

The 19th century had not seen major wars (the wars of Italian and German unification were relatively minor). By the end of that century, however, Europe was heading toward a major conflict made even worse by the technological innovations developed during the previous hundred years.



European Thought and Culture

The 19th century was an important period from the intellectual viewpoint. It enunciated trends that would be developed over the next hundred years. This is not surprising considering the spread of industrialization. At the beginning of the 19th century, a struggle for control of the various states continued from the previous century. The French Revolution had enunciated two major themes: liberalism and nationalism. These themes found important expression throughout the century and later.

Liberalism, at first considered to be the idea of liberty, especially economic, was restricted to a class of rich individuals—entrepreneurs and industrialists. They fought against the restoration of the monarchical idea, i.e., that the kings should rule in an absolutistic manner. Europe in the early part of the century was still ruled by kings who hoped to return as much as possible to the way things had been done before the French Revolution. The Bourbon Restoration in France itself was an example of this, but the struggle progressed far in France. With the overthrow of the Bourbons, then the Orleans dynasty, then the changes that took place during the Second Empire, and finally the Third Republic, the Liberals first wrested power from the kings and their noble supporters; then they slowly opened up to the middle class, people who were not rich, and, to a certain extent, to the poorer classes. The ideas of John Stuart Mill are indicative of this change (<http://www.utm.edu/research/iep/m/milljs.htm>). This evolution can be seen in France (the Second Republic, the Liberal Empire, the



Third Republic), and the England of mid-century and of the Victorian period. This same trend spread to Italy and, to a certain more limited degree to Germany and Austria.

At the same time, however, the new class of factory workers produced by the industrial revolution claimed power. In France, this trend may be seen by revolutions within the revolutions of 1848 (the “June Days”) and 1870 (the Commune) and found expression in Karl Marx’s Communist Manifesto and later, Capital. There have been many arguments as to whether Marx advocated violence or not as the primary means of overthrowing capitalism, but his writings were the inspiration of the highly organized and influential European Socialist parties founded during the late 19th century (which participated in the political system) that continued on into the 20th century and of the Communist movements that took over Russia and other important parts of the world and challenged capitalism.

The 19th century was an important period, therefore, for political philosophy, and in pure philosophy it was the last great century, producing such influential thinkers as Herbert Spencer (<http://www.iep.utm.edu/s/spencer.htm>) and Friedrich Nietzsche (<http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/nietzsch.htm>).

Nineteenth Century Science



Marx described his socialism as “scientific,” which illustrates how much the century paid homage to science. The 19th century excelled in biology, chemistry, and physics.

In biology, the most influential thinker was the Englishman Charles Darwin, whose great book, the 1859 The Origin of Species (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Darwin) announced the theory of evolution—how present species, including man, have evolved from earlier species according to their adaptability and survival abilities that are passed down to their descendants (“Survival of the Fittest,” “Natural Selection”). In microbiology and chemistry, the Frenchman Louis Pasteur (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louis_Pasteur) advanced the germ theory, developed new vaccines, and investigated fermentation. In physics, John Dalton (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Dalton) learned how to calculate atomic weights and advanced the atomic theory of matter that was developed during the 19th century. The Italians Alessandro Volta (<http://www.corrosion-doctors.org/Biographies/VoltaBio.htm>) invented the battery and did important work with electricity (the volt is named after him), while Amedeo Avogadro (<http://www.woodrow.org/teachers/chemistry/institutes/1992/Avogadro.html>), who worked with gases helped develop the theory of molecules. In the late 19th century, the old idea of the atom as indivisible fell apart as constituent particles that came from it were discovered (the electron in 1897).

Literature and Painting

Perhaps the two great movements we associate with the 19th century were romanticism and realism. These movements affected literature, art, and philosophical viewpoints.

Romanticism has been called “the revolt against the ‘Age of Reason,’” which had supposedly produced the French Revolution. In contrast to the rationalism, the religious disbelief, the cult of progress, and the assumption of human perfectibility that had marked the 18th century, the tendency in the early 19th century was to seek a principle of life based less on reason than authority. Custom and authority would underpin the cult of stability by which people could live. Organized society must be regarded as the natural, organic product of historical growth, not as the mechanical result of humanity’s logical facilities.

Although Romantics were conservative, especially at the beginning of the movement (many, for example, searched for origins of contemporary society in the Middle Ages), they were not united politically. Many were liberals and nationalists (Mazzini, the revolutionaries of the Frankfurt Parliament).

Romanticism may be seen more as a view of life than as a political movement. That is why aspects of Romanticism lasted into the 20th century and had an important effect on society and philosophical outlook during that century, both for good and for ill. Romanticism also affected painting (Ingres, Delacroix, <http://www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/delacroix/>).



Realism developed in mid-century and affected not only literature, especially in France (Flaubert, Balzac) and Russia (Turgeniev), but especially politics—it was supposed to have affected Bismarck (“iron and blood” and Cavour, the realist of Italian unification). This movement tried to give a “slice of life” in its literary and artistic depictions. The impressionists who dominated painting at the end of the century attempted to give a realistic, if not scientific, view of the world that they painted (Monet, Manet, Degas).

In these ways, the rich intellectual life of the 19th century anticipated and influenced the thought, culture, and movements that developed later.