

INTRODUCTION: THE APPROACH

This study has its origin in a long-standing preoccupation with the First World War—as a phenomenon in history and as a factor in the life of our own time. It is a preoccupation dating back to a period when I was a young and rather lonely man, living in Germany and the Baltic states, and consuming (for boredom is the greatest of stimuli to intellectual curiosity) some of the great German and other war literature of the Weimar period: Remarque, Haček, Hemingway, Bulgakov, and others. The initial effect of this confrontation through the printed page with a reality—namely the holocaust of 1914-1918—which lay scarcely a decade in the past was to force me to ponder the immense apparent injustice which the recent war had represented. Why, I was obliged to ask, had some eight million men, most of them young and on the very threshold of the fruition of life, been obliged to renounce the privilege of leading out their lives, to abandon those lives in horror, agony, and hopelessness, whereas I, now no older than most of them were, was permitted, because I was born some four or five years later than they were, to live in comfort and safety, and to look forward to enjoying at least the opportunity for mature self-expression? This question had both religious and social connotations.

And this was just the beginning. With the passage of time, after years of residence in Communist Russia and Nazi Germany and with the phenomenon of the Second World War now before me, it was borne in upon me to what overwhelming extent the determining phenomena of the interwar period, Russian Communism and German Nazism, and indeed then the Second World War itself, were the products of that first great holocaust of 1914-1918: Nature's revenge, if you will, for the fearful abuse of the process of human life which that holocaust had represented, but a revenge inflicted, as seems to be Nature's way, on a later and innocent generation. And thus I came to see the First World War, as I think many reasonably thoughtful people have learned to see it, as *the* great seminal catastrophe of this century—the event which, more than any others, excepting only, perhaps the discovery of nuclear

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weaponry and the development of the population-environmental crisis, lay at the heart of the failure and decline of this Western civilization.

Very well. But who could help, with all this in mind, being struck by the contrast between these apocalyptic results, on the one hand, and the accounts of the delirious euphoria of the crowds that milled around on the streets of the great European capitals at the outbreak of war in 1914, abandoning themselves to the pleasing delusion that in the pageantry of the moment—the blaring bands, the fluttering of flags, the fond farewells to departing reservists at the railway stations, the sense of a new national fellowship and solidarity—they were seeing the onset of some new and wonderful historical era, pregnant with pleasing self-sacrifice, adventure, valor, and glory? Were we not, it had to be asked, in the face of some monstrous miscalculation—some pervasive failure to read correctly the outward indicators of one's own situation?

Of course, human ability to see into the future had always been limited. But this twentieth century, we were brought up to believe, was an age of unprecedented enlightenment—the culmination of several decades of spectacular scientific progress, marking the emergence, for the first time, of a civilization holding at its command all the manifold tools of modern science and a rich record of historical experience. In such a civilization there should have been, one might have thought, at least a reasonable measure of concordance between expectation and result—a reasonable ability to calculate the relationship between observable cause and conceivable effect. And yet, in the instance at hand, there was not. How to explain this? Must not the mature generation of 1914 have been the victim of certain massive misunderstandings, invisible, of course, to themselves but susceptible of identification today? And if so, should one not attempt to identify them? Where was it that all these people went wrong? Their problems of understanding were by definition different from those of later generations. The relevance of one to the other would never be complete. But was there not a possibility that if we could see *how* they went wrong, if we could identify the tendencies of mass psychology that led them thus astray, we might see where the dangers lay for ourselves in our attempt to come to terms with some of the great problems of public policy of our own day?

All this drew attention, once again, to the hackneyed subject of the origins of the First World War. It was a subject that had been extensively chewed over in the 1920's and 1930's by way of reaction to the war-guilt clause of the Treaty of Versailles, so much so that by the outbreak of the Second World War everyone was tired of it. But these earlier explorations had been inspired in large measure by the effort either to pin upon others the responsibility for the catastrophe or to deny it

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for one's self; and they had served, accordingly, primarily to cancel each other out. By the end of the 1930's, with the immediate trauma of the conflict now rapidly fading, it was clear to every thoughtful observer that the origins of the war lay on a plane far deeper in space than the policies and actions of any single government or group of governments, and deeper in time than the final weeks immediately preceding the outbreak of war in 1914.

The indications were, then, for a review of the history of the origins of the war. But here, another complication presented itself—one which was destined to baffle the historian increasingly as the century ran its course; and this was the overwhelming, indeed unmanageable, abundance of source material. With the passage of decades, new material was constantly being published, and enormous collections of documentary evidence, heretofore locked away in governmental archives, were now becoming accessible to scholars. Other historians—scholars with quieter lives, more erudite to begin with, and less burdened by involvement with the abundant vanities of the contemporary world—might attempt to stem this flood of new documentation and even to master it, intellectually. One or two did. These words are not meant to depreciate the value of what they accomplished. But their works, aside from unavoidably involving a high degree of generalization, tended to be of such dimensions that they surpassed the patience and curiosity of the lay reader and achieved their greatest value as works of reference rather than as ones of intellectual penetration. And it was clear that this sort of effort, in any case, was not for the likes of me.

I saw myself reduced, therefore (not just in this present study but in earlier historical efforts as well), to resort to a species of what might be called micro-history: to take, that is, a smaller sector of happenings rather than a larger one, and to look at it in high detail, as through some sort of historical microscope, with a view not to attempting to describe the totality of the relevant events, but rather to examining the texture of the process; not to recording all the significant things that happened but rather to showing how they were happening; above all to revealing by what motives and concepts men were driven, as they said and did the things that the record reveals. To the task at hand—the identification of those traits of the Victorian-Edwardian outlook that caused people to wander so blindly into the horrors of the First World War—this process would do, after all, as well as any other and possibly better than some.

Not the totality of the origins of the First World War but a small sector of them was, then, what was indicated. But why precisely the Franco-Russian relationship? And why as far back as the 1870's? Here,

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the answers were easier. First, because the Franco-Russian alliance of 1894 was without question one of the major components out of which the fateful situation of 1914 was constructed, and of particular importance as a factor causing what began as a Balkan quarrel to grow into a conflict involving most of western Europe. Secondly, for the simple reason that I had, for scholarly purposes, the languages essential to the study of this subject: English, French, German, and Russian—a mundane factor, if you will, but one which every scholar of diplomatic history has to take into account. But finally, and outstandingly, because nowhere was this euphoria, as mentioned above, more strikingly and abundantly present than in the case of France and Russia (one has only to recall the hysterical mass enthusiasm that attended the reciprocal fleet visits in the early 1890's); and nowhere was the contrast more dramatic between these exalted expectations and the utterly catastrophic results, for both parties, of the war to which the alliance helped to lead: for the Tsar's regime—total destruction, in an orgy of horror and civil bloodshed unprecedented in the modern age; for the French—a fearful sacrifice of young manhood, and only fifteen years later the spectre of Hitler at their borders, consequences in relation to which the loss of the many billions loaned by the small French investor to the Tsarist government pales into a deserved insignificance.

This study was undertaken then, with a view to examining the origins (and eventually, if time and strength should permit, the consequences) of the Franco-Russian alliance, and to seeing whether, out of the materials thus brought to light, there might not emerge something resembling an image of those habits of thought, those visions of self and of circumstance, those assumptions and readings of observable reality, which misled people into expecting, from this single international arrangement, results so dramatically different from those that actually occurred.

The present volume is intended to cover only the historical background, in the period 1875-1890, against which, in the early 1890's, the alliance was actually to be negotiated and concluded. For me, personally, even this segment of the entire story yields its conclusions; and they will be described at the close of this account. Whether they could not have been reached with less effort of research—whether the same conclusions could not have been arrived at on the basis of other secondary material already available—is a question I cannot answer. This was *my* way of going about the task. Every scholar has his own. I hope that the tale will serve, at the least, to refresh in the minds of people of this epoch the fading image of European diplomatic life and thought, as all this existed in decades now nearly a century in the past: a function the value of which exceeds that of mere entertainment, for in the people

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of that age we can see, not entirely but in larger degree than is generally supposed, ourselves.

The period of history dealt with here was one inaugurated, and to some extent shaped, by the great events of the years from 1864 to 1871: the unification of Germany; the exclusion of Austria from the special position she had previously occupied as a member of the community of German states; the defeat, humiliation, and isolation of France. These events constituted a decisive change in the political map of Europe. And for none of the European Powers was this change of greater significance—for none did it present more challenging problems of policy—than for the two immediate neighbors of the new united Germany to east and west: Russia and France.

In the past, France had been able to exploit, in the interests of her own security, the differences *among* the various German states. She was faced now, if she was to work her way out of the isolation in which the unhappy ending of the Franco-German War of 1870 had left her, with the necessity of looking for support outside Germany—support against the united Germany with whom, alone, she felt unable to cope. There were several places where such support could possibly be sought, but two of them were of special significance: one was Austria-Hungary; the other was Russia.

Austria-Hungary, for various reasons, was never a very likely partner. When that Power was theoretically available—in the years 1871 to 1879—France was not yet in a position to ally herself with anyone. When France began to become once more in serious degree *bündnisfähig* (i.e., eligible as a possible partner in an alliance), Austria was already allied with Germany. Beyond this, the will was lacking on the Austrian side. There was, in Austria, no widespread spirit of revenge with relation to Germany comparable to that which existed in France. Austria had too many problems of her own, and too much need for German support in the solution of them, to be a suitable partner in an anti-German association. Nor was her military power such as to excite very extensively the interest of French strategists.

This left Russia: a country already known for its vast military manpower, and one whose policies, though for the moment not unfriendly to Germany, were still, as of the 1870's, not irrevocably committed. It was inevitable that France should look in this direction. The sense of humiliation and resentment flowing from the defeat of 1870 was profound and enduring. France was not accustomed to the experience of total defeat, in the modern manner. The desire for revenge permeated,

in one way or another, almost the whole of French society. It would, as Bismarck believed, probably have existed, and this in scarcely smaller degree, even had the Germans not insisted on taking Alsace and Lorraine; but this loss of territory served as a convenient symbol and rallying-point for it. Equally profound was the belief that France would never be able to achieve this revenge by her own efforts alone: that to make this possible she would have to have an ally.

For these reasons, the thought of an alliance with Russia was never, through the entire period from 1871 to 1894, wholly absent from the minds of French political and military leaders. There never was a time when this possibility did not appear as the greatest hope, the highest ultimate objective, of French policy. There were moments when, for one reason or another, this or that French statesman would not be interested in pursuing this possibility as an immediate objective of policy, for early realization. But by and large, the logic of it was inexorable; and it may safely be said that to the extent circumstances permitted—to the extent it was possible, that is, at any given time, to move in this direction without provoking preventive action on the part of the Germans or other undesirable consequences—the French were generally to be had for the enterprise. As one Russian diplomat put it to the French Russian specialist, Anatole Leroy-Beaulieu, in 1871:¹ “En prenant l’Alsace-Lorraine, Bismarck travaille pour nous. Strasbourg et Metz à l’Allemagne, c’est, pour la prochaine guerre, la France à notre dévotion.” (“In taking Alsace-Lorraine, Bismarck is doing our work. Germany’s possession of Strasburg and Metz means, for the next war, France at our service.”)

For Russia, the situation was quite different. There was no exact counterpart, here, for the humiliation of 1870. Close family bonds united the Russian and German imperial houses. To the extent Russians were to persuade themselves, in the years to come, that they had an enemy to the west of them, it would be Austria-Hungary, not Germany, who would figure most prominently in this role. And then there was the ideological distaste experienced at the Russian court for the political personality of republican France—a distaste concentrated in the mentality of an absolute ruler who was himself the chief architect of Russian policy. This was a reaction which found no parallel in the mild, confused, and highly variable feelings with which French republican politicians viewed the institution of monarchy in Russia.

To be sure, there would be, at all times in the years following 1871, people of some influence in Russian society who would favor an alliance with France. Their voices would be at times weak, at other times strong. Public opinion, too, would fluctuate. But there would never be,

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on the part of responsible Russian statesmanship as a whole, anything resembling the degree of commitment to this prospect that existed in France. Russian policy makers, in contrast to the French ones, had a number of options. They could, of course, ally themselves with France; that was one possibility; but there were other ways they could survive. The question as to whether, or when, such an alliance would come into existence thus became a question as to whether or when circumstances would be such as to impel the Russians to opt for this alternative and to commit themselves to a common action with France.

Bismarck was, of course, at all times aware of this. He saw to it during the entire period of his responsibility for German policy, albeit with increasing difficulty as the years of the 1880's ran their course, that such a set of circumstances did not come into existence. In this he was effectively aided, down to 1887, by the passivity or lack of imagination that characterized the series of French politicians who bore (as a rule briefly and spasmodically) responsibility for the formulation of French policy. These included no one even remotely comparable in stature or in authority to the towering figure who, until 1890, faced them on the German side of the line. But eventually the circumstances in question did arise; and it is the purpose of the present work to describe the manner in which this came to pass.

To do this involved confrontation with a series of subsidiary problems to which, in the existing secondary literature, no fully satisfactory answers had been found. Were there really clandestine contacts, for example, running as far back as the early 1870's, between the French and Russian general staffs? Was the Tsar Alexander III justified in his suspicion that his ostensible allies, the Austrians and Germans, were secretly working against him in the Balkans and were really responsible for the successive discomfitures and reverses sustained in the 1880's by Russian policy in Bulgaria? This suspicion, after all, played a leading part in weaning him from his political and contractual relationship with the Germans and Austrians and placing him in a position where an alliance with France appeared as the only halfway-promising alternative. And did the Tsar wait for the lapse of his treaty relationship with Germany, in 1890, before moving towards this alliance with France, or were there really Russian approaches to the French along this line as early as 1879, and again in 1886?

To what extent, again, was the breakdown of Russia's relationship with the German and Austro-Hungarian courts the product of the activity of the civilian chauvinists in France and the Pan-slavs in Russia, or of the military hotheads on both sides? What value is one to attach to the extravagant claims of such shadowy figures as Élie de Cyon and

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Jules Hansen to have been important promoters of the alliance? How did the French foreign minister, in 1887, come to feed into the Tsar's hands, under utmost secrecy, false documents designed to persuade the latter of the faithlessness of Bismarck? And was there a modicum of truth in the suggestions these documents were designed to convey, even if the documents themselves were spurious? To what extent, in other words, was the alliance the product of well-considered and compelling national interest on both sides, and to what extent the product of self-interest, prejudice, and intrigue?

I have felt obliged to satisfy myself as best I could about the answers to these and other such questions; and the reader, it seemed to me, had a right to see the evidence on which such conclusions were based. It is these considerations that have dictated, in large measure, the character of the book. But it is my hope that the work will serve, in addition to this severely scholarly purpose, to illuminate something of the diplomatic customs of the time, and to evoke that ineffable quality of atmosphere without which no era of history can be made real and plausible to those who have not themselves experienced it.