

World War I Policy and Strategy: The Relationship between Ends and Means **By Walter S. Zapotoczny Jr.**

Before World War I, Europe was a continent in which a handful of nations exercised control over a large number of people. "It was predictable that reactions between all should be infused with suspicion and rivalry," writes John Keegan in his book *The First World War*. There was a strong and matching military rivalry and arms race between the continental powers. All European armies by 1904 had military plans, notable in most cases for their inflexibility. Keegan states that none was integrated with what today would be called a "national security policy," made in conference between politicians, diplomats, intelligence directors, service chiefs, and designed to serve a country's vital interests. The concept of national leadership did not exist at the time. Military plans were held to be military secrets in the strictest sense, secret to the planners alone and scarcely communicated in peacetime to civilian heads of governments. They were often not shared between the services. Initial war plans took on mathematical rigidities, with which staff officers confronted political leaders.

In Germany the people felt that they needed and deserved an acknowledged supremacy like that of the British. German businessmen began to challenge the British in their traditional markets and other European states began to gravitate to Berlin and a friend of their interests. In his book *Diplomacy*, Henry Kissinger describes how the Kaiser wanted most was international recognition of Germany's importance and power. The Kaiser attempted to conduct a global policy which amounted to slogans and no substance beyond the need for recognition. Kissinger writes, "The reason German statesmen were obsessed with naked power was that, in contrast to other nation-states, Germany did not possess any integrating philosophical framework." Bullying tactics seemed to Germany's leaders the best way to bring home to their neighbors the limits of their own strength and presumably, the benefits of Germany's friendship. This taunting approach had quite the opposite effect. Trying to achieve absolute security for their country, German leaders threatened every other European nation triggering coalitions designed for their own protection.

The German army and the Kaiser had succeeded in excluding both the War Ministry and parliament from military policy-making, war planning belonged exclusively to the Great General Staff. Appointed as Chief of the German Great General Staff in 1891, Schlieffen began at once to consider in the abstract how best to assure his country's security in the political circumstances prevailing. The plan inherited from his predecessors took the predicament of Germany's interposition between France, relentlessly hostile since the defeat of 1870 and the loss of Alsace-Lorraine, and Russia, long France's friend, as their starting point. That signified the eventuality a two-front war. The plan concluded that the German army should fight defensively both in the west and in the east.

As Schlieffen studied the possibilities, he concluded that France was weaker than Germany but protected by forts and Russia was weaker than Germany but protected by great space. Given the relativities of force, he arrived in progressive stages at a plan to commit seven-eighths of Germany's strength, in the contingency of war, to an overwhelming offensive against France. Believing that its neighbors were preparing for war, German military plans were more designed around preemptive actions than in support the German diplomatic goals.

France had fought Germany in the Franco Prussian War in 1870 resulting in a dramatic and embarrassing defeat for France. The Germans had forced France to sign a humiliating treaty in 1871, The Treaty of Frankfurt, which signed over the industrialized region of Alsace-Lorraine to Germany. In her book *The Proud Tower* Barbara Tuchman writes, "...in political

life the nation was at odds with itself, galled from within by the un-reconciled, un-subdued adherents of the *Ancien Regime* and the Second Empire, opposed from without by the superior strength of Germany and the sense of unfinished war between them, hankering for revenge without the means to achieve it." Ever since 1871, relations had been at an all time low. France, worried about the escalating military development of Germany, began building up their war industries and army as a deterrent to German aggression. As another measure, France developed a strong bond with Russia by joining the Franco-Russian Alliance, which was designed to create a strong counter to the Triple Alliance. France's main concerns were to protect against an attack from Germany, to reincorporate the lost territories of Alsace-Lorraine and to avenge its defeat during the Franco-Prussian War. After some trepidation and assurance by the British and Russians of support, France's military plans evolved into a plan to attack Germany across their common border should war come. France drew comfort from the commitment of support from Britain and the agreement with Russia of help should war breakout. The French military plans that were developed supported their diplomatic goals. Their alliance with Britain and with Russia was thought to be enough to counter Germany and therefore, after Germany was defeated, would avenge the Franco-Prussian War and regain the Alsace-Lorraine region.

By the 1890s, Great Britain's leaders began to recognize that the empire was straining under the pressures of competition. The government had to deal with the decline of Great Britain's relative standing vis-à-vis Germany, Russia and France. While still pre-eminent, the dominance it had enjoyed in the middle of the nineteenth century was slipping. Britain's policy towards the continent up to this point had been one of isolation. Kissinger writes, "Germany's insistence on the abandonment of England's non-committal policy towards involvement on the continent and the insistence on guarantees or treaties lead British policy-maker to suspect Germany's motives. Germany's offering of sweeping commitments to defend the British Empire led Great Britain to suspect that it was in fact seeking world domination." British military plans in support of British policy objectives were more a plan to assist the French in stopping the German war plans. A British expeditionary force would land in Belgium causing the Germans to divert forces from engagement with the French across their common border.

Russia was by far the largest of all the six European powers, but was also the most backward. The country was almost entirely agricultural, although loans from France had helped Russia to develop some industry. Russia shared France's worries about Germany. It feared that the Germans wanted to carve a huge empire out of Russian land in central Europe. This was also coupled with Russia's long history of rivalry with Austria-Hungary, an ally of Germany. Austria-Hungary had recently annexed most of Yugoslavia angering Russia immensely. Russia had considered itself the leader of the Slavic world and viewed the invasion as an intrusion into Russian territory. To counter act Austria-Hungary's aggression into the Balkans, Russia signed an agreement with Serbia to aid it militarily in the face of Austro-Hungarian invasion. Russia had also recently fought a grueling war with Japan in 1905 resulting in widespread discontent among the Russians. A full on revolt took place as an attempt to overthrow Tsar Nicholas II. He survived, but he knew Russia could not afford to lose in another conflict. Tsar Nicholas II knew Russia was weak. To counter his enemies militarily and politically he sought to revive the Franco-Russian Alliance. Russia signed the Anglo-Russian treaty with Britain to counter act the threat of the Triple Alliance.

Russian military plans involved fighting the Germany alliance in the east while the French and British fought in the west. In no position to go to war alone, Russia counted on the combined effort of their alliance to defeat Germany and to settle accords in the Balkans. There diplomatic goals were supported by combined military actions.

United States military actions clearly supported U.S. diplomatic goals in World War I. As Kissinger writes, "America's entry into the war made total victory technically possible, but it was for goals which bore little relation to the world order Europe had known for some three centuries and for which it had presumably entered the war." America's disdain of *Realpolitik*, politics or diplomacy based primarily on practical considerations, rather than ideological notions.

Collective security, self-determination and democracy were America's criteria for international order. President Wilson believed that the United States had to enter the war if it was to shape the future on international relations. By July, 1918, America had nine divisions in the Allied line. The badly overstrained Germany began to falter. Over 250,000 American troops were landing in France every month. The Germans could not withstand the overwhelming American forces and sued for peace.

Overall, the military strategies chosen in WW I by the all the combatants except the Americans were ineffective in producing the desired results. The initial combatant's soon lapsed into trench warfare and stalemate with considerable casualties. The war changed the map of Europe dramatically and created new national identities. The experiences of war lead to social distress for all of the countries that participated. Subsequent conflicts in the Balkans and the Soviet Union's ideological confrontation with the west were products of the conflict. In the Middle East war satisfied nobody. The British and French were given large chunks of the former Ottoman Empire, frustrating Arab independence. The war solved some problems and created others. The military strategies and plans of the principle combatants proved ineffective. America emerged from the war an international power in the position to promote its diplomatic goals.

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