

# The Hague Conference of 1907: Politically and Culturally Preparing Europe for War

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**WRITER'S COMMENT:** *I believe there are three secrets to writing a good essay. The first secret is to choose a topic that interests you. I am very interested in how conflicts can be avoided through diplomacy. We can learn a lot from mistakes made in the past, and the Hague Conference of 1907 was an example of world leaders failing to use diplomacy to avert a world war. The second secret for any paper, but especially a history paper, is to fully research a broader topic of interest before focusing on a thesis. I began my essay by extensively researching in the library various historical events leading up to the world war, and did not develop my thesis until I had fully researched the narrower topic of the Hague Conference and its role preceding the war. Finally, I wrote multiple drafts and revisions of this paper before it was finished.*



—Nick Schroeder

**INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT:** *Nick Schroeder originally wrote this paper as an assignment in History 145, War and Revolution in Modern Europe. The origins of the First World War is a topic with which historians have grappled endlessly, so it was necessary for Nick to narrow the subject in order to focus his research and formulate a thesis. Nick has done this well by examining what historians treat as some of the longer-range aspects of the war's origins, and particularly by highlighting the importance of the year 1907. Nick explores the importance of this year through what would seem an irony: the centrality of a peace conference specifically meant to limit an arms race. He sets up the historical problem well through a succinct contextualization of the situation prior to the conference, the conference itself, and its consequences, both politically and culturally. This last cultural aspect is not always explored in historical works on the war's origins, but Nick uses his sources well to*

*highlight the elevation of nationalistic fervor. Finally I would just like to mention Nick's use of sources. He went far beyond the basic requirements of the original assignment. In particular, those reading this paper should note his balance of sources. He did not lean too heavily on one source, but integrated quite an array of them. This is a very fine essay that demonstrates how a student, through solid research that cultivates his or her interests, can learn to write history effectively.*

—Charles Hammond, History Department



**T**HOUSANDS OF BOOKS AND ESSAYS have been written analyzing the origins of the First World War. The most common explanation for the immediate outbreak of the war equates Europe to a powder keg whose violent nature is precariously held together only until the proper fuse has been lit. This analogy continues by arguing that the fuse was lit with the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, which caused chaos and an explosion of nationalistic fervor that launched Europe into the bloodiest conflict in human history. Although the powder keg story is true, it is insufficient because it only explains the immediate causes of the war. It is important for us to understand the events leading up to the war to determine what created the powder keg, and to learn how we can avoid creating similar situations in the future. There are a number of factors that helped create the powder keg, but one of the most significant factors was European leadership failing to use diplomacy effectively to ease tensions between Britain and Germany. In this paper, I will examine how European leaders created the powder keg that sparked the First World War through the failed use of diplomacy at the Hague Conference of 1907.

After its unification in 1871, Germany became the dominant land Power of Europe with an army larger and more skilled than that of any other country. At the same time, Britain had been the naval Power in Europe for almost half a millennium, and throughout that history, Britain used its naval superiority as a tool to balance the land Powers of Europe. Germany feared that Britain would use its naval might to balance Germany's power and "encircle" Germany by forging alliances with neighboring France and Russia. This fear of encirclement was Germany's main rationalization to bolster its naval capabilities at the end of the nineteenth century, which led to the naval rivalry and arms race between

Britain and Germany that lasted up to the First World War. In 1907, the Second Hague Conference convened to develop a naval arms limitation agreement between Germany and Britain in an effort to prevent war on the Continent. The Conference is considered monumental in the development of international laws and norms, but was not successful in producing an armament limitation agreement. The failures of the Hague Conference of 1907 to produce a limitation agreement forced Britain and Germany to seek out alliances, which set the stage politically for the First World War by establishing the two alliance blocs that would fight in the war. Its failures also prepared Europe for war culturally by exacerbating the fears and animosities between the German and British peoples and inciting nationalistic fervor. The political and cultural consequences of the failures of the Hague Conference transformed Europe into a powder keg whose instability would throw Europe into war at the slightest flash.

After finding its new position as the dominant land Power following its unification in 1871, Germany feared that Britain would use its dominance over the seas to entice France and Russia to enter into an alliance and encircle Germany. This fear was not entirely misplaced as Britain had already formed an *entente* with France, and had historically used its naval power to balance the Powers of Europe by using it as a tool to convince countries to join its side.<sup>1</sup> Britain followed the naval theory of geopolitical theorist Sir Julian Corbett who argued that Britain should maintain its naval superiority to protect its commerce and to serve as leverage against Continental Powers to balance the power of any potential foe.<sup>2</sup> Based on Corbett's theory, it seemed likely that Britain would seek an *entente* with Russia in an effort to balance the power of Germany: Russia was a land Power and had no naval power to protect its interests in the face of a German naval threat. Germany realized that its dreams of a land empire could be crippled if Russia and Britain joined forces to balance its power.

The leadership of Germany was determined to transform the recently unified country into an empire that would be the supreme global Power and believed that the way to accomplish this was to challenge the naval hegemony of Great Britain. Admiral Tirpitz and Kaiser Wilhelm II were the greatest proponents of bolstering the German Imperial Navy as a means to challenge British hegemony.<sup>3</sup> The German strategy to increase its navy as a means to become a global Power was adopted from a leading geopolitical theory in the new age of imperialism that was promoted by

U.S. Admiral Mahan, suggesting that for a country to become a global Power it had to have command of the seas: Mahan argued that to accomplish this command of the seas, a country must use its navy offensively against the commerce and navies of competing Powers, for which it was necessary to have a decisively large navy.<sup>4</sup> Tirpitz saw Germany rising as a world Power to equal footing as Britain through building a German battle fleet, and he intended to use the fleet offensively to obtain the status of global Power through the weakening of British hegemony.<sup>5</sup>

The fear of Britain encircling Germany gave the German leadership the perfect argument to rationalize its navy build-up, not only to the international community, but also to domestic protests from members of the Reichstag from the Social Democratic Party (SPD). Wilhelm argued to the international community that Germany's naval increase was merely a way to ensure Germany's commercial prosperity and that it was by no means meant to be used offensively;<sup>6</sup> however, the Kaiser warned that if cornered, Germany would use its navy offensively and stated that "a policy directed at German encirclement, the creation of Powers around Germany to isolate and cripple her, that would be a policy dangerous to the peace of Europe."<sup>7</sup> Domestically, the Kaiser and Tirpitz convinced members of the SPD in the Reichstag that the encirclement of Germany needed to be prevented with the construction of an imperial navy to protect the commercial interests of Germany and for the survival of the new nation.<sup>8</sup> Tirpitz argued that the only way to prevent the encirclement of Germany was to challenge Britain's hegemony of the seas: "Germany must have a battle fleet so strong that even for the adversary with the greatest sea power a war against it would involve such dangers as to imperil his position in the world."<sup>9</sup> The Reichstag passed the Navy Laws of 1898 and 1900 outlining a plan for Germany to acquire a fleet that could be a threat to that of the British Royal Navy by 1905.<sup>10</sup>

Britain interpreted Germany's naval build-up as a direct threat to its national security and commerce. Being an island nation, Britain has always relied on its navy as its main line of defense against potential offenders, and a potentially equal German naval fleet would mean that Britain was defenseless: if Germany could break through the naval defense, Britain's army would be no match for the German army. Winston Churchill argued in response to Germany's Navy Laws that Britain's naval power was necessary to Britain's national survival and that "a German fleet is a luxury not a national necessity, and is *not* therefore a fleet with a pacific

object.”<sup>11</sup> In response to Germany’s naval laws, Britain’s government declared that it would maintain its overwhelming naval supremacy over Germany at all costs.<sup>12</sup> Germany’s determination to acquire a large fleet and Britain’s equal determination to maintain naval superiority threw the two countries into a naval arms race that accelerated from the time of the 1898 Navy Law to June of 1907 when the Hague Conference reconvened to discuss armament limitations.

The Hague Conference is considered monumental in the development of international norms because it set an example of how countries could meet for future organizations such as the League of Nations and the United Nations,<sup>13</sup> but the Conference failed to ensure peace through an arms limitation agreement. In the course of the Conference, the delegates agreed on a few policies, but, as Peter Padfield points out in his study *The Great Naval Race*, “cynicism was more apparent than determination to grapple with the real problems of European peace.”<sup>14</sup> The voting behavior of the delegates illustrated that the Powers were already politically aligned for the First World War, as the delegates voted in blocs, with Austria and Germany always voting against France, Britain, Russia, and the United States.<sup>15</sup> Britain came to the Conference prepared to agree to an armament limitation, but Germany refused because it wanted to fully implement its Navy Laws and considered Britain’s limitation proposal as a means to keep Germany from completing its naval program;<sup>16</sup> Tirpitz scoffed at Britain’s proposed limitation agreement by saying, “here is England, the colossus, come and ask Germany, the pygmy, to disarm.”<sup>17</sup> From the beginning of the Conference it became apparent that an armament limitation agreement would never materialize between the two rivals.

Germany’s refusal to sign an armament limitation agreement at the Hague Conference motivated Britain and Russia to sign an *entente* actualizing Germany’s fears by effectively encircling it by the Triple *Entente*. In April of 1904, Britain had smoothed over any grievances between itself and France and the two countries signed an *entente* to formalize the newfound friendship between the two nations.<sup>18</sup> It was publicized by neither France nor Britain that the *entente’s* true purpose was to balance Germany’s power, but one diplomat from Britain noted, “our object ought to be to keep Germany isolated . . . she is false and grasping and our real enemy commercially and politically.”<sup>19</sup> After Germany’s refusal to sign an armament limitation agreement at the beginning of the Hague

Conference in June of 1907, Russia and Britain actualized the isolation of Germany with an *entente* signed between the two Powers in August of 1907. The British Foreign Office publicly stated that its agreement with Russia was not directed against Germany and had “no other object than to place [Britain’s] relations on a safer and more secure basis in the general interest of peace.”<sup>20</sup> It is evident, however, that Britain’s true intention of forming the Triple *Entente* was to balance the power of Germany as noted by Sir Nicolson when describing the *entente*: “the subconscious feeling did exist that thereby we were securing some defensive guarantees against the overbearing dominance of one Power.”<sup>21</sup>

The political foundation for the military blocs that fought in World War One became set when Germany responded to the formation of the Triple *Entente* by strengthening its alliance with Austria. In his 1935 work, *Great Britain and the German Navy*, E.L. Woodward argues that Britain’s *ententes* were so effective at balancing Germany’s power that the “numerical superiority of the British fleet, supported by the fleet of France, and, in a few years time, by a new Russian fleet, [made] chances of [German] victory very remote.”<sup>22</sup> As it became apparent that Britain was formalizing its agreement with Russia, Germany renewed the Triple Alliance in July of 1907 between itself, Austria-Hungary, and Italy in hopes to offset the *entente* Powers.<sup>23</sup> The reformation of the Triple Alliance was more of an effort to cinch relations with Austria than Italy as Italy was not consequential to the game of balancing power in Europe in the minds of German leaders: Chancellor Bülow stressed in a memorandum that “Austria is our one sure ally,”<sup>24</sup> and Germany made every effort to ensure that Austria did not leave its side. With the Triple Alliance reformed to oppose the Triple *Entente*, the balance of power in Europe was restored, and German and British naval armament accelerated as both sides politically and militarily prepared for war.<sup>25</sup>

The acceleration of the arms race and inflamed nationalism that resulted from the failed conference created a lot of fear among the people of Europe, and prepared Europeans for what was commonly seen as an inevitable war. Much like the arms race that existed between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, the fear of war created animosities between the people of the rivaling nations. The animosities between the people of the Triple *Entente* and the Triple Powers increased dramatically with the failures of the Hague Conference, and the press and cinema incited nationalism by capitalizing on the rivalry, drawing

the public into the matter until society saw war as the only solution to ensure national integrity.<sup>26</sup>

Most of the animosities that brewed among the people of the countries were motivated by propaganda and press coverage depicting the other side as savage war-hungry nations as they both accelerated their naval programs. In Britain, the press and media emphasized Germany's adoption of Mahan's theory of the offensive use of naval power, which deepened the common fear that Germany was intending to mount an invasion against the British Isles and gave the people a sense that Britain had to attack Germany first to maintain national security.<sup>27</sup> Leading up to the war, a surge of "invasion literature," such as the book, *The Invasion of 1910*, depicting the inevitable invasion of the British Isles by German hordes, cultivated fear in Britain through popular culture.<sup>28</sup> Media and press made people fear Germany, and that fear spawned increasing animosities, as British Socialist Leader August Bebel explained: "The German government will never be able to eradicate from the minds of the English people the idea that the German Navy is directed against England."<sup>29</sup> In Germany, the majority of the propaganda cultivating animosities against the British was promulgated by the German government in an effort to build patriotism for the newly unified country.<sup>30</sup> The government used the education system, army institutions, and the press to convince the people to act as one nation to prepare for Britain's invasion.<sup>31</sup> The propaganda also convinced the German Public that it might be necessary to launch a preemptive invasion of Britain to avoid a British invasion of Germany.<sup>32</sup> In both Germany and Britain, the people's fears of the other country grew into animosities and culturally prepared both nations for what was perceived as an inevitable war between the two Powers and consequently between the two alliance systems.

The Hague Conference of 1907 was intended to lay out a path towards peace by systematically ending the naval arms race between Germany and Britain, but Germany's refusal to agree to an armament limitation agreement politically and culturally paved the road towards the First World War. Britain responded by attempting to balance Germany's power by creating the Triple *Entente* with Russia and France, which effectively encircled Germany. In response to the formation of the Triple *Entente*, Germany and Austria reentered the Triple Alliance, which established the political foundations for the military alliance blocs that were to fight in the First World War. Britain and Germany both accelerated



their naval programs following the failed Hague Conference, which created fears among the British and German people that the other country was going to invade. These fears grew into animosities between the two nations, and it was perceived by most that war was inevitable between the two Powers because a preemptive war was seen as the only way to end the arms race while maintaining national integrity. The Hague Conference of 1907 was not the immediate cause of the First World War, but the consequences of failing to reach an armament limitation agreement contributed greatly to the political and cultural environment in Europe that forced the Continent into war in 1914.



## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Geoffrey Till, “Sir Julian Corbett and the British Way in Naval Warfare: Problems of Effectiveness and Implementation.” In *Navies and Global Defense*, ed. Keith Neilson and Elizabeth Jane Errington. (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1995), 25.

<sup>2</sup>Till, 25.

<sup>3</sup>E.L. Woodward, *Great Britain and the German Navy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935), 19–28.

<sup>4</sup>Keith Neilson and Elizabeth Jane Errington, ed., *Navies and Global Defense* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1995), 3.

<sup>5</sup>John H. Maurer, “Arms Control and the Anglo-German Naval Race Before World War I: Lessons for Today?” *Political Science Quarterly*, 112, no. 2 (Summer, 1997), 287.

<sup>6</sup>Woodward, 19–20.

<sup>7</sup>Peter Padfield, *The Great Naval Race: The Anglo-German Naval Rivalry, 1900–1914* (London: Hart-Davis, 1974), 159.

<sup>8</sup>Padfield, 334.

<sup>9</sup>Padfield, 334.

<sup>10</sup>Ivo Nikolai Lambi, *The Navy and German Power Politics, 1862–1914* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1984), 142.

<sup>11</sup>Padfield, 183.

<sup>12</sup>Maurer, 289.

<sup>13</sup>Detlev F. Vagts, “The Hague Conventions and Arms Control,” *The American Journal of International Law*, 94, no. 1 (January, 2000), 31–41.

<sup>14</sup>Padfield, 156.

<sup>15</sup>Padfield, 162–63.

<sup>16</sup>Padfield, 156.

<sup>17</sup>Padfield, 157.



<sup>18</sup>Padfield, 110.

<sup>19</sup>Padfield, 110.

<sup>20</sup>Woodward, 150.

<sup>21</sup>Woodward, 150.

<sup>22</sup>Woodward, 152.

<sup>23</sup>Woodward, 183.

<sup>24</sup>Woodward, 182.

<sup>25</sup>Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism 1860–1940* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1980), 444.

<sup>26</sup>Marc Ferro, Nicole Stone, tr., *The Great War, 1914–1918* (London: Routledge, 1973), 22.

<sup>27</sup>Kennedy, 376.

<sup>28</sup>Kennedy, 376.

<sup>29</sup>Padfield, 180.

<sup>30</sup>Kennedy, 377.

<sup>31</sup>Kennedy, 377–78.

<sup>32</sup>Kennedy, 377–78.



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