

### **How Did The Actions of Wilhelm II Contribute to the Outbreak of WW1**

World War I was a complete war with many contributing factors. Germany certainly was not solely to blame, however the actions of Wilhelm II were a major catalyst. While many were involved in the colonial rivalries and nationalism of the time, Wilhelm made a few enormous and easily avoidable blunders which would prove to have a disastrous effect.

The German political system was one factor which indirectly lead to WWI.

As this was not an action of Wilhelm's it shows that he was not the only factor. However Bismarck's rule immediately previous had set up a complex and volatile system which would prove disastrous in the wrong hands. The German constitution of 1871 stated that the Kaiser had complete control. While Wilhelm I was in charge this worked perfectly. However once Wilhelm II came to power it proved to have many faults. Bismarck had also created a complicated web of alliances in Europe between Germany, Russia, Italy and Austria-Hungary. Once again this shows that the situation, which was fragile, that Bismarck left Germany in, was unsuitable for anyone but himself. In this sense we can see that Wilhelm II is not wholly to blame. Obviously Bismarck could not have predicted what was to come but the situation was unacceptable to hand over to a man with a thirst for power and little diplomatic skill.

Wilhelm's policy of Weltpolitik was a major contribution to WWI. A direct contrast to

Bismarck's Realpolitik, Wilhelm wanted to extend Germany's power into North Africa and the far east. He took steps towards this by colonising Kiaochow in China and building the Berlin-Baghdad Railway. This directly conflicted with Britain's interests in Asia. Traditionally Britain had control of Asia and this was the first case of Anglo-German tensions, which majorly contributed to WWI. Wilhelm lacked the sensitivity in these matters and the common sense which Bismarck had possessed, to prevent a change in the balance of power. However it could be argued that Wilhelm had equal right to extend his influence in Asia and Africa. Just because Britain had gotten there first didn't mean that they had the divine right to it. Germany was becoming the third largest industrial power in the world and also required the raw materials and markets of colonies.

Another action of Wilhelm's which made war more likely was in allowing the Reinsurance Treaty to end in 1891 and his following alliance system. He believed that his relationship with Tsar Nicholas II would be enough to maintain strong relations. He was grievously wrong as Russia became uneasy and made an Alliance with France. France strengthened this alliance by funding major projects such as the Trans-Siberian Highway. This Entente Cordiale presented Germany for the first time with the possibility of a two front war. It also brought France who were hungry for revenge after the humiliating Treaty of Frankfurt in 1871, out of isolation. Wilhelm decided to ally with Austria-Hungary and Italy instead. This turned out to be a major contributing factor as not only did it majorly shift the balance of power, placing France in a better position than it had been in 30 years, but it gave Austria-Hungary a sense of security and the confidence to act with little caution such as in the Bosnian Crisis of 1905.

One of the biggest of Wilhelm's actions to make war more likely was his Naval Policy. In 1897 Admiral Von Tirpitz became head of the navy and presented his 'Risk Theory'; that he

German navy should be powerful enough to inflict serious damage and to defer attack. There began to be a series of Iron Budgets in 1900, 1902, 1906 etc. To pay for the increase in Navy. This was a major contributor to the outbreak of war as England took it as a direct threat. Having traditionally ruled the seas, England had always possessed the largest Navy. This action, perhaps unintentionally completely antagonised the British. This was not simply an ego project of Wilhelm's however. Pressure groups such as the German Navy League pushed for growth in the Navy and Wilhelm argued that a navy was necessary to become an international power. Arguably once again he had equal right as Britain. That said it directly led to the end of British isolation and the situation on Europe of 1907 of the Triple Entente facing off against the Triple Alliance.

The Naval Policy led to an arms race between Britain and Germany in particular which led directly to WWI. Admiral John Fisher invented the HMS dreadnought in 1904, the first all big gun warship. Germany followed suite soon after in 1907. In 1918 England possessed 29 and Germany had 19. Increases in Naval spending in both countries were also dramatic, for Britain in 1890, 9.8 million to 47.4 million in 1918. Similarly in this period in Germany it went from 10 million to 22.4 in the same time period. The widening of the Kiel Canal to allow dreadnoughts pass through worried the British and further pointed towards war. The arms race made war more likely as the population was that they had all these weapons and had suffered harsh taxes to pay for them. Now they wished to see them used. There was a definite mood for war in Europe in 1914. It also increased tensions between Britain and Germany. Britain was just looking for an opportunity to declare war, which was why the murder of an Austrian archduke in Sarajevo led to war between Britain and Germany.

Finally Wilhelm's series of diplomatic blunders in the 1890's and 1900's made war more

likely. One such example was the Jameson raid. The British had connections to a poorly planned raid in the Transvaal region in South Africa led by Dr. Starr Jameson. It was a total disaster and an embarrassment to Britain. Wilhelm II made the situation worse completely unnecessarily by sending a telegram to Paul Kruger, president of the Transvaal, congratulating him for squashing the raid which worsened sentiments between England and Germany. The Boer war also contributed to this as German's flocked to fight in it against the German side. The Moroccan Crises were also examples of Wilhelm's poorly thought out actions contributing to war. The first crisis in 1906 involved France trying to take further control of Morocco. Wilhelm moved to prevent this, perhaps in an attempt to discover how strong the Triple Entente was. It was a disaster yet Wilhelm didn't learn from this and there was a second crisis in 1911. Wilhelm sent the gunboat Panther up the Agadir to threaten the French. However almost all of Europe united with France against Germany. This showed the strength of the Triple Alliance and the fact that Italy was not a loyal ally. It also humiliated Wilhelm and perhaps made him wish to seek revenge. Certainly he refused to be humiliated again.

From all of these factors it's clear to see that many of Wilhelm's actions made war more likely. He completely dismantled Bismarck's alliance system and his naval policy was clearly antagonistic. I think that these 2 factors were the main causes of WWI and clearly influenced by Wilhelm's actions. However it's certainly not fair to say that Wilhelm alone caused WWI. Austria's actions in the Balkan's, Britain's refusal to share power and France's thirst for revenge also contributed to this. I believe that even without Wilhelm's actions, a world war would have come about, although possibly at a much later date.

