Military Pressures

There was a widely held conviction among Germany’s military and political leaders that war with Russia was inevitable. Given that Russia had, in the wake of the defeat in the Russo-Japanese War, embarked on very extensive reforms and reequipment of its military, it would be better to have that war before 1917 when the reforms would be effective. There were those who advocated any excuse be seized or created to initiate a war, what we would call a preemptive war. Thus, Fischer argues that these elements wanted war, the sooner the better. The clash of Russian and Dual Monarchy interests in the Balkans had nearly led to war earlier, and the Triple Alliance would provide Germany with the excuse to join in against Russia in any conflict.

Fischer contends that officials high up in the German military in fact went to work immediately on the news of the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand to use it as a means to bring about a war. At the very least, if Russia remained aloof, the Dual Monarchy would crush Serbia and this danger to the Dual Monarchy (Germany’s most important ally) would be ended. If Russia did enter, then Germany would have its opportunity to take on the Russians in the inevitable war but on conditions more favourable to Germany than if the war came several years later.

These military elements exercised pressure on the German government to use its influence with the Dual Monarchy’s government; however, these elements also went around their own government and using their direct contacts, began to urge both the Austrian government and Conrad, head of the Dual Monarchy’s military, to launch a war against Serbia. Not only did the Germans give the famous ‘blank cheque’, Fischer even argues that the Austrians were threatened that if they failed to act, Germany might wash its hands and leave the Dual Monarchy on its own in future. Thus, he argues that most of the responsibility for the Austrian ultimatum to Serbia and the start of the war lay with German leaders.

German Expansionism

Fischer argues that Germany was the most dissatisfied of the great powers and therefore, the most eager to alter the status quo. There was widespread support in Germany for expansionism in 3 directions:

(a) MittelEuropa

- this was to be a German dominated entity occupying much of central and eastern Europe. Large areas (the low countries, the Dual Monarchy and much of western areas of the Russian Empire) would be incorporated into this entity.

- it presupposed that Russia would be greatly reduced in power and territory as a result of defeat by Germany.

- France would perhaps have its industrial north-east corner annexed by Germany and be reduced to an economic satellite of the German giant.

- this idea had been adopted by the Pan German League which was vigorous in promoting the programme.

- it was clear that neither Russia nor France would willingly accept these changes and creation of MittelEuropa would require that both be crushed militarily; war was a prerequisite.

(B) MittelAfrika

1. this was the concept of joining up the 3 main German African colonies (South West Africa, German East Africa and Kamerun) to form a giant entity occupying all of central and much of east Africa. This dream had been around since the late 1890s. A German foreign minister, Caprivi, had even negotiated a
jumping off point—a long finger of territory which extended from the north east corner of South West Africa; it became known as the Caprivi Strip.

2. British imperialists such as Rhodes and German imperialists were in great competition to wrest control of Angola and Mozambique from the Portuguese and to get control of the areas which have now become Zimbabwe, Zambia and Malawi. In the end, Rhodes was successful in getting the interior areas for Britain; Germany and Britain each preferred that Angola and Mozambique remain in Portuguese hands rather than go to their rival. In effect, they cancelled each other out.

3. MittelAfrika was also seemingly dependent on the creation of MittelEuropa. The Congo would come to Germany if Belgium were annexed or made a German satellite. The British would be forced to negotiate if confronted by this new German superpower dominating Europe; in effect, they would be made an offer they couldn’t refuse! Thus, it too could be realised only in the wake of a successful European war.

(c) Middle East policy

- this was the notion of expanding German influence in the Middle East all the way to Persia. This would involve displacing the British and French influence in the Ottoman Empire and might even project a threat to the British in India (this threat to India was to be one of the main elements of intimidation, along with the new navy Germany began to build in 1896, that would force the British to make concessions in Africa and elsewhere).

- a major symbol and means of projecting German influence into this area was the Berlin-Baghdad railway. It also involved German military and other aid to the Ottoman government.

Social and Political Concerns

Conservative elements, especially among the Junkers and to a considerable extent including the Kaiser, were disturbed by the growth of unions and socialist parties in Germany. They were looking for a way to stop the rot and to repress these elements.

They saw war as the best opportunity and occasion to do this. These conservatives, including substantial numbers of the military officer corps, wanted the immediate arrest of union and socialist party leaders as soon as mobilisation orders were issued and the war began.

Therefore, war was seen as necessary cover under of which these pernicious organisations and people and the unacceptable trends that they represented could be scotched.

Hence, Fischer’s argument is that many leaders and opinion makers were clearly in favour of an early war, seeing it as the best, the quickest and perhaps the only means to achieve the important goals which they sought. While they were not all advocating deliberately provoking a war, they did see the outbreak of war as an opportunity; thus, they were not especially anxious to avoid war.

Others (one might include the chancellor, Bethmann-Hollweg) were less enthusiastic about war and were concerned about both the negative effects and the possibility of losing; nevertheless, they did not oppose war very vigorously or were ineffective in preventing war. The glittering prospects held out by the hawks and Pan German enthusiasts tended to dazzle and blind them as well; if war would bring so many benefits, were they justified in thwarting the outbreak of war and the possibilities of Germany’s advancing to ‘world power’ status?

At the least, they became divided and dilatory, but at other times, they might be swept along.

Source: http://husky1.stmarys.ca/~wmills/course520/fischer.html
Thesis: Germany was hoping for a war, sooner rather than later to expand its empire, subdue its enemies and gain political control at home

- Germany wanted war sooner rather than later (Russian military reforms, blank cheque) and pressured Austria-Hungary to act against Serbia upon punishment of breaking the alliance.
- Germany was the most dissatisfied great European power and was eager to shift the balance of power by controlling more of Europe (Central and Eastern – Russian, Austrian, Balkan territory), Africa (the centre – in direct conflict with Belgium and England) and the Middle East (taking advantage of the crumbling Ottoman Empire, Berlin-Baghdad Railway – in conflict with Britain as such plans drew Germany much closer to British India).
- German leftist parties were gaining popularity and momentum and as a result, seriously disturbing the Junker (nobility) class of Germany, including the Kaiser; thus, such men thought a war, sooner rather than later, would provide the cover necessary to suppress such leftist political movements – although there were men in power in Germany who did not look at war so favourably (Bethmann-Hollweg)
- Germany sent a number of ultimatums to a number of European nations to demand their cessation of hostilities toward the Central Powers; perhaps a form of intimidation
- Although Berlin attempted to maintain an image of innocence by claiming all powerful decision-makers were away, on vacation, during the July Crisis – the fact remains that the most important decision-makers were working hard in Berlin during the Crisis, including the likes of Bethmann-Hollweg and the German Ministers of War
An analysis of Fischer’s thesis, adapted from Wallace G. Mills:
http://husky1.stmarys.ca/~wmills/course520/fischer.html

Bethmann-Hollweg was the Chancellor of the German government. A key issue in examining the validity of Fischer’s argument is the question of whether or not Bethmann-Hollweg was pursuing these expansionist and aggressive policies.

Although there were obvious social and political concerns, in Germany on the eve of World War I with the rise of socialist parties and unions, Bethmann-Hollweg was actually reluctant to crush these unions and socialist parties because he feared the effects of such actions on national unity. On the outbreak of war, this concern led him into urgent negotiations with socialist politicians, urging them not to oppose the granting of war credits; however, according to Fischer, this indicated only that Bethmann-Hollweg hoped to avoid repression of the socialists but that he was willing to do it if they did not fall into line.

There has been much argument about whether or not the Chancellor allowed himself to be carried away by the Kaiser and the other hawks\(^1\) at the famous meeting in Berlin between the Kaiser, Bethmann-Hollweg, Zimmerman, Falkenhayn and others upon receiving information from Hoyos on behalf of Berchtold after the assassination of Franz Ferdinand. It was at this meeting that it was decided to give the ‘blank cheque’ to the Dual Monarchy. There is a good deal of ambiguity: Bethmann-Hollweg was either ineffective or got caught up in the enthusiasm. Certainly, it is clear that he had qualms with giving the cheque; nevertheless, it is Fischer’s contention that Bethmann-Hollweg too was dazzled by the possibilities of expanding Germany’s territory and defeating a formidable foe on its eastern frontier, so he allowed himself to be swept along in spite of his reservations and concerns. Fischer further argues that Bethmann-Hollweg never seriously reversed himself as the crisis continued to evolve; thus demonstrating his ultimate conviction to go to war.

Early in the crisis, German strategists, especially in the military, decided that there were three possible outcomes if the crisis were pushed: (1) a limited war between the Dual Monarchy and Serbia if Germany could threaten and intimidate everyone else to stay out; (2) a general European war if the two alliances became involved (with Britain remaining aloof); (3) a world war which would involve British participation as an enemy.

According to Fischer, the hawks regarded the first possible outcome as highly desirable and the second was acceptable as they thought there was a good chance of winning and being able to achieve the agendas outlined above if Britain was not involved. It was only the third possibility which produced any real concern, even though it was not of much real concern as the German general staff regarded the British army with great contempt. The hawks were confident that the British army could not be a factor in the early stages of war, which were the most important stages, as the war would be over before the British could build up their forces and challenge the German ones. Thus, in this outcome, the British would be presented with a fait accompli\(^2\) which they would have to accept; however, Bethmann-Hollweg was one of those who looked on the third outcome as undesirable and something to be avoided.

Historians have widely accepted the interpretation that the German government, including Bethmann-Hollweg, probably expected or at least must have recognised the high probability that the Russian government would come to the assistance of Serbia; therefore, they supported the Austrians with ‘eyes wide open’ and not passively.

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\(^1\) Term used to describe those who would prefer to go to war; as opposed to doves, those who would prefer peace  
\(^2\) Something that has been done and cannot be changed
The German government also ignored warnings from British Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey, about the seriousness of the situation in the Balkans and its potential consequences. Even more, there was Bethmann-Hollweg’s famous assurance to Grey that if Britain remained aloof, Germany would not make any annexations in Western Europe; in other words, the Chancellor was operating through much of the crisis under the impression, or delusion, that Britain was so reluctant to get involved that it could be easily persuaded to remain aloof. Thus, if Britain were reassured that the situation in western Europe right across the English Channel were not changed, then it would be prepared to allow Germany a free hand in central and eastern Europe. This was a significant oversight and so, much is made of this by Fischer. Britain was fiercely protective of its colonies, especially that of India. Germany’s ambitions with the Berlin-Baghdad Railway through the declining Ottoman Empire brought it threateningly close to the British Jewel. Additionally, Britain greatly valued its holdings in Africa and German ambitions in that continent, essentially creating a German-central Africa, conflicted directly with well established British colonies.

Throughout the July Crisis, the German government worked to allow or even to push the Dual Monarchy to take military action against Serbia by threatening to dissolve the Triple Alliance. Furthermore, it is inconceivable that the hesitant Dual Monarchy would have taken action if Germany had shown the least opposition as its army was weak and could not withstand a prolonged conflict with Russia which would ensue upon any Austrian attack on Serbia. Thus, the Austrian government did not jump; it was pushed.

Not until it was very late, after it finally got through to Bethmann-Hollweg that Britain was unlikely to remain aloof from a general European war, that he finally began to take actions which seemed to urge moderation and to show a desire to avoid war. Most historians, even Albertini – a great critic of Germany – have accepted the view that Bethmann-Hollweg finally awakened to the danger that a ‘world’ war could erupt and was concerned to try to stop it. By then it was too late to stop the avalanche of events and Europe was swept over the precipice into war. Fischer, however, rejects this interpretation as he argues that the actions which Bethmann-Hollweg took in seeming efforts to halt the drift towards war were mostly for show and that he did not do anything concrete - a couple of rather wishy-washy telegrams to the Austrian government were issued by Berlin, but nothing serious such as threatening to withdraw German backing if the Dual Monarchy went ahead with the attack on Serbia. Bethmann-Hollweg’s main concern was not to avoid war, but to avoid the appearance that Germany was responsible for the outbreak of war. His actions were intended to create the appearance that war was being forced upon a reluctant Germany. Thus, even when faced with the probability that Britain would become involved, the Chancellor was prepared to go along with ‘rolling the dice’ as advocated by the hawks.

Later, during the war, Bethmann-Hollweg declared that had he known that Britain would become involved, he would have acted differently. Fischer dismisses this as second guessing after the real consequences were apparent – ‘hindsight has twenty-twenty vision’. Like so many other Germans, in 1914 Bethmann-Hollweg too was bedazzled by the prospects for victory and the possible gains that could be made in a successful war, sooner rather than later.

What is it that you should notice about this essay?

1. This essay is an analysis:
   a) The essential elements are broken down and interrelationships are shown and assumptions are uncovered, with detailed evidence
2. This is essay is not a narration
3. Detailed evidence is applied to support the hypothesis/thesis
4. The essay is a strong example of: this happened for that reason; not just, this happened, this happened, this happened
5. There are strong topic sentences that support the thesis
6. The topic sentences are supported by good evidence and explanations; each body paragraph can be read like a mini-essay
7. There are strong conclusion sentences that wrap up the paragraph: it is NOT up to the reader to understand what the writer was trying to get across, the writer tells the reader what their point was.