

Origins of the First World War

To what extent was Kaiser Wilhelm II a significant factor in causing the First World War?

Subject: History

Word Count: 3986

Contents

	Page Number
Introduction	3
Balance of Power	4
Naval Expansion	5
Daily Telegraph Affair	8
July Crisis	11
Conclusion	15
Bibliography	17

Introduction

'Power is in flux, it disperses, becomes localized, and in doing so changes its character' (Clark, 2011, 136). This statement sets out the difficulties of ascertaining the influence of people or nations. In this essay I hope to do both and establish to what extent Kaiser Wilhelm II was a significant factor in causing the First World War. I will argue that although the Kaiser played a role, he was not the leading cause for the war. Carr asserts that 'the study of history is a study of causes' (Carr, 1961, 87). If we accept this notion and combine it with the arguments of Wong who argues that by searching for causation we can 'create a new taxonomy of historical studies that leaves behind national narratives' (Wong, 2011, 54) then we find the application for this essay. By examining the Kaiser's role in causing the First World War, we can look for broader trends and parallels in different locations and periods, to better understand how leaders can influence nations and the course of history. I have selected three key events/policies in which the Kaiser can be seen as having had an impact in causing the First World War: Naval expansion, the Daily Telegraph Affair and the July Crisis. From these key events we can infer the extent to which the Kaiser was a significant factor in causing the First World War. In terms of how these events themselves differ as causes, naval expansion threatened Britain while the Daily Telegraph Affair confirmed this threat. The July Crisis resulted in war due to the circumstances made by the two aforementioned events. I will assess significance by the impact of the policy/event and the Kaiser's relevance within it.

Balance of Power

The significance of the policy/event is judged by the impact it had on the balance of power in Europe, which was what sustained peace. Britain was often critical to the maintenance of the balance of power, therefore the impact of German actions on the balance of power is often judged via their impact on Anglo-German relations. In order to establish what undermines the balance of power we must first establish in what conditions it can exist. Kissinger argues that the balance of power is maintained as long as one of three conditions apply. Firstly, that each nation feels 'itself free to align with any other state' (Kissinger, 2012, 182). This condition was quickly undermined by a series of alliances, meaning that only Britain able to do so, until 1907 when it joined the Entente (Kissinger, 2012, 182). The Kaiser did not play a major role in undermining this condition. The second condition is 'when there are fixed alliances but a balancer sees to it that none of the existing coalitions becomes predominant' (Kissinger, 2012, 182). The Triple Alliance (1882) and the Franco-Russian Alliance (1891) were fixed alliances and Britain the balancer. Anything which resulted in damage to Anglo-German relations undermines the role of Britain as a balancer, because the worse relations became, the greater chance that Britain would join the Franco-Russian alliance. This would give that alliance predominance, breaking the second condition for the maintenance of the balance of power. The third condition is when the cohesion of alliances is low, allowing 'compromises or changes in alignment' on any issue (Kissinger, 2012, 182). Therefore, anything which worsens relations between the two alliances increases the likelihood of war by reducing the possibility of states changing alignment and increasing the cohesion of alliances.

Naval expansion

The Kaiser could be seen as a significant factor in causing the First World War through the impact of German naval expansion on Anglo-German relations and the Kaiser's role in the policy. The Royal Navy was critical to Britain for security and trade as it was both an island and an empire. Therefore, one would expect any threat to the dominance of the Royal Navy to be an issue for Britain. However, this may not have been the case. In 1907 Sir Edward Grey spoke of how 'we shall have seven dreadnoughts afloat before they have one', suggesting that Britain was not fazed by the German naval expansion (Clark, 2012, 150). Yet Grey was Foreign Secretary, a political position, thus the statement could be rhetoric. In 1906 the Permanent Under Secretary to the Foreign Office spoke of how Germany was not a threat to the British Navy in the short term (Clark, 2012, 150). First Sea Lord Sir John Fisher wrote to the King describing British Naval dominance once more, (Clark, 2012, 150) showing that the official and political figures in the Foreign Office were in agreement, as were the military.

Yet this idea that Britain was not threatened by German naval expansion is not shown in policy. Alfred von Waldersee wrote in his diary on the subject of the naval arms race, stating 'whenever we order a new ship, England immediately places an order for 2 or 3' (Röhl, 2014, 25). This suggests the threat was taken seriously. By 1914, Britain had 34 dreadnoughts and dreadnought battle cruisers in comparison to Germany's 22 (Bose, 2014). This is significant as the first dreadnought was commissioned in February 1906, significantly after the first German Naval law in 1898. Therefore, even in numbers of new ships built, ignoring overall strength,

Germany could not keep up with Britain, even in the race for dreadnoughts. A race where both sides started from zero, showing the determination of Britain to maintain naval superiority, disproving the idea that Britain was not threatened by German naval expansion. If it was no threat, as some made it appear, Britain would not be desperate to maintain their lead. The language being used by senior figures was probably an attempt to live up to Britain's status as a Great Power and owner of the most powerful navy. To acknowledge Germany as a threat would be to lose status. So, they did not acknowledge them as a threat, instead acted upon it. Therefore, German naval expansion worsened Anglo-German relations, pushing Britain closer to joining the Franco-Russian alliance, undermining the second condition for balance of power. The effect of naval expansion was long term, with the naval arms race continuing through the lead up to war. By threatening Britain, Britain was pushed towards Russia and France to gain more support in order to counter the threat which they believed Germany posed.

The Kaiser's role in Germany's naval policy seems clear at first. In one document, Bülow wrote of how 'overseas policy' required 'adequate naval power'. In the margin, the Kaiser scribbled that this was what he had been 'preaching to those donkeys of Reichstag deputies every day for 10 years' (Röhl, 2014, 23) showing that the Kaiser had been pushing German naval expansion for a long time. This reflects determination for the policy but undermines the Kaiser's efficacy in its implementation, undermining his relevance in it. The Kaiser took the throne in 1888, the German Navy had been one of his central aims in his reign, yet no plans for naval expansion were passed until 1898. This raises questions about his importance. Perhaps the real catalyst for the expansion in the German navy was the appointment

of Admiral Tirpitz as Naval Secretary in 1897, as the First Fleet Act was passed a year later. This planned for a navy containing, but not limited to, 16 battleships, 9 large and 26 small cruisers (Hubatsch, 1998). The Kaiser appointed Tirpitz. Therefore, whilst the Kaiser was unable to achieve naval expansion without Tirpitz, he did appoint him, demonstrating the Kaiser's responsibility for the policy, and furthering the extent at which he is a significant factor in causing the First World War.

However, the Kaiser actually exercised very little control over the policy itself. He appeared to favour a cruiser-based fleet. He gave lectures in 1895 where according to Röhl 'he [deplored] the fact that Germany... had no adequate cruiser fleet' (Röhl, 2004, 1005). Tirpitz favoured heavy battleships over cruisers. The Second Fleet Act planned to raise the number of battleships by 20, compared to increasing the numbers of large cruisers by 2 and small cruisers by 8 (Hubatsch, 1998). As argued by Volker Berghahan, Tirpitz was defending his naval policy against the Reichstag and the Kaiser himself, due to differences with the Kaiser over whether to prioritise cruisers against battleships (Berghahan, 1991, 187). Hence why Clark concludes that 'it was Tirpitz himself who had seized control over ... the naval programme' (Clark, 2009, 191). As well as the evidence above, since Clark specialises in German history, has won the Wolfson History prize (St Catherine's College Cambridge, 2015) and been awarded the Officers Cross of Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany (Gresham College), showing his calibre as a historian, it does seem that his conclusions here are valid. One must note that regardless of the extent of control exercised by the Kaiser after Tirpitz took over, that does not change that Tirpitz was appointed by the Kaiser and without him, would not have been able to enact any naval policy. Given how Tirpitz 'displayed great skill as a

parliamentarian' (Hubatsch, 1998) it is unlikely the naval policy could have progressed without him.

In summary, Germany's naval expansion damaged Anglo-German relations by threatening British naval dominance. By doing this it planted the idea that Germany was a threat to Britain on a more general basis. The British position is illustrated by how actively they engaged in the arms race. While the Kaiser did not exercise any significant control over the policy itself, without him appointing Tirpitz, the German navy was unlikely to have expanded to the extent that it did. Therefore, the Kaiser is only partially responsible for the policy and its effects. In terms of naval policy, the Kaiser cannot be seen as a significant factor in causing the First World War.

Daily Telegraph Affair

The Kaiser could be seen as a significant factor in causing the First World War via the Daily Telegraph Affair and its impact on Anglo-German relations. At the time of the interview, Britain was allied to Japan via the Anglo-Japanese Treaty of Alliance (1902) and Russia and France via the Triple Entente. In the interview the Kaiser disparaged or criticised many of Britain's allies. He said that France and Russia had called on the German government to 'humiliate England to the dust' during the Transvaal disputes. He also stated that German naval expansion was aimed at Japan and 'the possible national awakening of China', not Britain (German History in Documents and Images). This made the interview appear as an attempt by the Kaiser to alienate Britain from her allies. Orgill argues that in England, these comments 'confirmed both the international threat that Germany posed and the

concomitant need to push forward with battleship construction' (Orgill, 2016). The impact of these remarks in Britain was clear. King Edward refused to view the Kaiser's comments as 'well intentioned', whilst Asquith confirmed Britain would maintain naval superiority (Röhl, 2014, 673). The latter strongly supports Orgill's argument. Furthermore, there was 'utter despair' in the German Embassy in London, Röhl describes how Count Metternich 'sighed that one might as well shut up shop completely' and how von Stumm called the Kaiser 'the greatest gaffeur in Europe' (Röhl, 2014, 673). The feelings of senior German diplomats in the German Embassy in London are very useful when ascertaining the effect of the Kaiser's remarks on Anglo-German relations, as their positions meant they were very well attuned to the impact of events on relations. From the above we can see the damaging nature of the Kaiser's remarks and how they worsened relations, thus undermining the balance of power and increasing cohesion of alliances.

However, Clark argues that it is 'absurd' that the Daily Telegraph Affair damaged Germany's relations with other countries (Clark, 2009, 246). This could be for two reasons. That Britain would not be heavily influenced by the Kaiser's comments, or that the Daily Telegraph Affair was more media storm than anything else. It is possible that given the interview was just with the Kaiser, British officials and politicians would not have taken it too seriously, as the Kaiser was not the sole influencer over foreign affairs and is relatively prone to outbursts which may not reflect policy. He once suggested to the US President that a 'Prussian army corps' be stationed in California after press speculation of a war between the USA and Japan (Clark, 2012, 179). However, as Otte points out, 'it was generally acknowledged in political circles...that German foreign policy was 'largely dependent

on the idiosyncrasy of the Emperor” (Otte, 2001). Thus even if remarks were just from the Kaiser, they would still be taken seriously. The idea that the Daily Telegraph Affair was just a media storm is incorrect, as shown by the evidence above. However, even if we were to assume that it was, then we could still not discount its impact. As pointed out by Orgill, ‘British decision making elite were closely connected to journalists and editors’ and took notice of their opinions when making policy (Orgill, 2016). However, it would be natural for a historian who has written numerous articles on the press in the run up to the First World War, to have a natural subjectivity towards the significance of the press. Despite this, based on the evidence as a whole, the Daily Telegraph Affair did impact Anglo-German relations, an argument best personified by the reaction of Metternich and von Stumm. Therefore the Daily Telegraph Affair did undermine the balance of power, thus bringing Europe closer to war.

At first glance, the responsibility for this impact should clearly lie with the Kaiser, as the comments were his. However, the Kaiser actually sent the manuscript of the interview to Bülow yet Bülow did not read it, instead it was approved by a minor official (Feuchtwanger, 2002, 148). He did this despite the manuscript being sent with a letter from Bülow’s cousin, who was accompanying the Kaiser at the time, warning against the publication of the manuscript (Clark, 2009, 243). The Kaiser specifically sent the manuscript to Bülow because he did not ‘want to entrust it to some subordinate figure in the foreign office’ (Clark, 2009, 243), yet due to Bülow’s neglect, this is what happened. Therefore, it is unfair to hold the Kaiser completely responsible for the effects of the Daily Telegraph Affair, considering he had

specifically sent it to Bülow with the intention of avoiding any controversy. The fact that Bülow neglected the instructions of the Kaiser, is no fault of the Kaiser's.

It is important to note however that the Kaiser allowed these comments to be published too, (Porter and Armour, 1991, 16) as he had the authority to block it. It was also the Kaiser who originally made these comments. Therefore, the Kaiser must hold a portion of the responsibility, however given that he did try to follow all appropriate procedures and was let down by officials who failed to carry out their duties, it would be wrong to allocate all responsibility to the Kaiser. Thus, the Kaiser cannot be seen as a significant factor in causing the First World War, though he did play a part in damaging Anglo-German relations by confirming to Britain that Germany was a threat, undermining the balance of power and increasing the cohesion in alliances.

July Crisis

The Kaiser could also be seen to be a significant factor in the outbreak of war through the impact Germany had during the July Crisis. Austria and Germany were undoubtedly close allies, thus the importance of the German stance on how to respond to the murder of Archduke Franz Ferdinand cannot be overstated. It seems Germany took the stance of encouraging a response. Bethmann-Hollweg stated on July 6th, that 'whatever Austria's decision...Germany will stand behind her as an ally' (Kissinger, 2012, 209), referring to the response against Serbia. This support became known as the 'blank cheque'. Lieven describes this response as 'the single most decisive moment in Europe's descent into war' (Lieven, 2015, 317). This is

because Austria was now free to act as she wished. An overly strong response risked war with Russia, which would pull in Germany and the Entente. Therefore, some have asserted that by allowing Austria a blank cheque Germany caused the First World War.

However the blank cheque was not necessarily a response of encouragement, nor a cause of the First World War. However, the Kaiser wrote of how the response was 'a matter for the Emperor [Franz Joseph] alone to judge' (Röhl, 2014, 1037). Therefore, it appears Germany was deferring the response to Austria via the blank cheque, instead of encouraging a strong response which would lead to European War. Furthermore, the blank cheque was not a cause of the First World War, instead a response forced by the circumstances of Germany's alliance with Austria, and the severity of the crime. If Germany had attempted to stop Austria from taking action, then there may have been diplomatic consequences. In addition, the death of the heir to the Austrian throne was a very serious issue. These two things left Germany with a dilemma described by the German Chancellor on July 7:

'If we urge them [the Austrians] ahead, then they will say we pushed them in; if we dissuade them, then it will become a matter of our leaving them in the lurch. Then they will turn to the Western Powers' (Kissinger, 2012, 200).

Whilst these comments could be interpreted as a cast iron defence of the blank cheque, it is unlikely that, as the Chancellor appeared to believe, Austria would have withdrawn from the Triple Alliance, due to lack of support, for the Entente. This would have involved working with Russia, who were supporting Serbia during the crisis.

Thus it appears the Chancellor was mistaken, or possibly mischaracterising the situation to try and push the support of Austria. Furthermore, if there was such concern in Germany about being seen to encourage Austria, then it is odd on 8 July Tschirschky informed Berchtold on the Kaiser's orders that 'Berlin is expecting the Monarchy [Austria] to act against Serbia' (Röhl, 2014, 1027). Therefore it appears at first that the deferring of the judgement to Austria may have been a tactic for Germany to absolve itself of ostensible responsibility, whilst subtly pushing for action.

As Kaiser, Wilhelm was a critical part of the German Constitution, thus one would expect his personal view on the matter to be significant in ascertaining Germany's role in the crisis. It has been asserted that the Kaiser seemed to be heavily pushing war. The Kaiser wrote in a marginal comment how 'now or never' Serbia ought to be 'sorted out' (Röhl, 2014, 1016), whilst also reprimanding Tschirschky on adopting what Röhl calls a 'restraining line' earlier in the crisis (Röhl, 2014, 1022). Admittedly, marginal comments are far from clear orders or policy, though given how they were probably written based on instinct more than careful deliberation, they may provide effective insight into the Kaiser's opinions. Historians have interpreted these warmongering comments as a desire for a European War. In actuality, they reflect a desire to act against Serbia and the same applies for the blank cheque.

Often historians have assumed that Serbia was nothing but a pretext for European War in the eyes of the Kaiser but this is not the case. As shown by the Kaiser's personal feelings towards Serbia and the belief that a conflict with Serbia could be localised. Mombauer talks of how the Kaiser was 'genuinely grieving his friend'

(Mombauer, 2017) which is reinforced by how Röhl describes the Kaiser's 'sincere displeasure' at his eldest son for not expressing sympathy in writing (Röhl, 2014, 1021). Given that Röhl is both a historian and author of a three-volume biography of the Kaiser, and has written numerous other works on him, when it comes to his judgement on how the Kaiser felt about events, there are few better judges.

Therefore, it seems the Kaiser's apparent warmongering attitude is from a desire to take revenge against Serbia. The Kaiser also did not believe that Russia would intervene, meaning that any conflict would be localised. This is shown by the Kaiser's comments to one admiral early into the crisis, where he stated 'The Tsar would not in this case place himself on the side of the regicides' and that Russia was not ready for war (Clark, 2009, 286). Therefore, a strong response to Serbia was not an attempt to bait Russia to war because the Kaiser believed that they could not be baited. This was not wilful ignorance either, Clark argues that Germany had 'good grounds' to assume Russia would not intervene, due to their 'very incomplete' armaments programme (Clark, 2009, 304) hence why the Kaiser believed what he did. Though Sasonov made what Röhl calls a 'clear declaration' (Röhl, 2014, 1036) of the Russian position, which was intervention if Austria's response was too strong, leading some historians to accuse the Kaiser of ignoring the facts, this was interpreted as posturing, due to the state of Russian armaments.

Yet the strongest argument against the Kaiser being a significant factor in causing the First World War is found in how the Kaiser reacted to Serbia's response to the Austrian Ultimatum. After receiving the Serbian response to the ultimatum, the Kaiser wrote in a letter to Jagow of how with their response 'there is no longer any reason for war', yet a 'temporary military occupation of part of Serbia' is required to

make sure the promises are fulfilled (Röhl, 2014, 1054-55). Given that the Kaiser wrote this in a letter to the Foreign Secretary, it is clear that these were his true beliefs, and what he wished to be implemented, thus making this source particularly valuable. However the Kaiser's instructions were never implemented. Bethmann did dispatch a telegram to Tschirschky, though it failed to mention there was no longer a reason for war (Röhl, 2014, 1055). Thus the Kaiser was not as in control of German policy as thought by some historians, nor was he trying to push for a European War.

In summary, the Kaiser did not want a European War. The circumstances around the state of Russian armaments and the crime committed led to him pushing for a strong response against Serbia. The damage done to the balance of power left the international system vulnerable to the effects of a crisis such as this. Given the Kaiser attempted deescalate the crisis after Serbia's response to the ultimatum shows this. The fact that this policy was not implemented shows a lack of power inconsistent with someone who was a significant factor in causing the First World War.

Conclusion

This essay considered a limited range of events in establishing the impact that the Kaiser had on causing the First World War. The selection of events is justified throughout this essay via their impact on the international conditions. Through the Kaiser's actions in these events, we can infer the extent at which he was a significant factor in causing the First World War.

German naval expansion undermined the balance of power in Europe. It led to Britain feeling threatened by Germany, damaging Anglo-German relations and increasing the chance of Britain joining the Franco-Russian Alliance. Yet the Kaiser did not have significant influence over the policy, as shown by his failed attempts to initiate it and the policy's initiation only occurring after the appointment of Tirpitz, thus he is only partially responsible at the most. The Kaiser may have been root cause of the damage done to the balance of power via the Daily Telegraph Affair. It was interpreted as an attempt to alienate Britain from her allies which confirmed the idea that Germany was a threat to Britain. This increased the coherency of alliances and undermined the third condition to the maintenance to the balance of power. The Kaiser was the cause of this damage, yet it should be noted that had Bülow carried out his duties properly, then the damage would have been avoided. Again, the Kaiser is only partially responsible at most. What both these events reflect is that the Kaiser tends to be an impetus to events, yet those around him have the opportunity to shape them, reflecting a lack of control from the Kaiser. This is also seen in the July Crisis, where the Kaiser wanted a response against Serbia, yet Jagow and Bethmann shape this towards a European War, despite orders to the contrary. As a result of the damage done to the balance of power via naval expansion and the Daily Telegraph Affair, the July Crisis led to war. Therefore, the Kaiser was not a significant factor in causing the First World War. However, those around him, who failed their duties, and disobeyed orders, quite possibly were.

Bibliography

Berghahn, V. (1991), Des Kaisers Flotte und die Revolutionierung des Mächtesystems vor 1914' in Röhl, J (ed.) *Der Ort*, pp. 173-88

Bose, E. (2014) *Arms Race Prior To 1914, Armament Policy, International Encyclopaedia of the First World War*. Available at: https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/arms_race_prior_to_1914_armament_policy (Accessed: 26 May 2020).

Carr, E. H. (1961) *What is history?* New York: Vintage.

Clark, C. (2009) *Kaiser Wilhelm II*. London: Penguin Books.

Clark, C. (2011) 'Power', in Rublack, U. (ed.) *A Concise Companion To History*. Oxford: OUP Oxford

Clark, C. (2012) *The Sleepwalkers*. Penguin UK.

Feuchtwanger, E. (2002) *Imperial Germany 1850-1918*. Routledge

German History in Documents and Images (no date) *Daily Telegraph Affair, German History in Documents and Images* . Available at: http://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=757.

Gresham College (no date) *Christopher Clark*. Available at: <https://www.gresham.ac.uk/professors-and-speakers/christopher-clark/> (Accessed: 1 October 2020).

Hubatsch, W. C. (1998) *Alfred Von Tirpitz*, *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Alfred-von-Tirpitz#ref1637370> (Accessed: 26 May 2020).

Kissinger, H. (2012) *Diplomacy*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Lieven, D. (2015) *Towards the Flame*. Penguin UK.

Mombauer, A. (2017) *July Crisis 1914*, *International Encyclopaedia of the First World War*. Available at: https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/july_crisis_1914 (Accessed: 9 June 2020).

Orgill, N. N. (2016) “‘Different Points of View?’: The Daily Telegraph Affair as a Transnational Media Event”, *The Historian*, 78(2), pp. 213–257.
doi: [10.1111/hisn.12161](https://doi.org/10.1111/hisn.12161).

Otte, T. G. (2001) “‘The Winston of Germany’: The British Foreign Policy Élite and the Last German Emperor”, *Canadian Journal of History*, 36(3), pp. 471–504.
doi: [10.3138/cjh.36.3.471](https://doi.org/10.3138/cjh.36.3.471).

Porter, I. and Armour, I. D. (1991) *Imperial Germany 1890 - 1918*. 6th edn. New York: Addison Wesley Longman.

Röhl, J. C. G. (2004) *Wilhelm II: The Kaiser's Personal Monarchy, 1888-1900*. Translated by Sheila de Bellaigue. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Röhl, J. C. G. (2014) *Wilhelm II: Into the Abyss of War and Exile, 1900-1941*. Translated by Sheila de Bellaigue and Roy Bridge. Cambridge University Press.

St Catherine's College Cambridge (2015) *Professor Sir Chris Clark*. Available at: <https://www.caths.cam.ac.uk/directory/professor-sir-chris-clark> (Accessed: 1 October 2020).

Wong, R. B. (2011) 'Causation', in Rublack, U. (ed.) *A Concise Companion To History*. Oxford: OUP Oxford