

CASE STUDY 2

Wilhelm II rocks the boat

Bismarck's skills in diplomacy

In the nineteenth century, Germany's chancellor, Otto von Bismarck, used **militarism** and nationalism to engage in three foreign wars that resulted in the unification of 39 separate German states into one nation.

Germany became a nation in 1871 following a war in which the German state of Prussia defeated France and took its provinces of Alsace and Lorraine. Not surprisingly, France was a bitter enemy of the new German nation and hoped for an opportunity for *revanche* (revenge). Bismarck created a system of alliances that would help Germany to stay at peace, consolidate its economy and industries and isolate its enemy, France.

In the period 1873–90, rather than give in to nationalist and militarist demands for further German expansion, Bismarck formed alliances with Austria-Hungary, Russia and Italy. These alliances gave Germany important allies who promised not to support France in any war against Germany. This system offered a sense of security to European nations that feared Germany's strength. With Britain maintaining a policy of '**splendid isolation**', Germany felt safe.

Kaiser Wilhelm II

This policy changed after Wilhelm II succeeded his father as Kaiser of Germany in 1888. Wilhelm II was renowned for his lack of diplomacy, the skill at which his chancellor — Bismarck — excelled. He had none of the skills of **traditional diplomacy** and he frustrated foreign diplomats with incessant talk, his apparent inability to follow or listen to an argument and his tendency to act without thinking of the consequences. He was rude and patronising towards other nations and frequently made offensive comments. In 1895, for example, he congratulated the Boers on their victory against the British in the Transvaal. In saying this, he showed no concern for protecting Germany's good trading relationship with Britain or the goodwill emanating from the fact that Britain's Queen Victoria was his grandmother.

militarism:
the desire to have military strength
ready to use to advance one's
national interests

splendid isolation:
Britain's policy of remaining
isolated from the problems
of Europe so as to focus
on strengthening the
British empire

traditional diplomacy:
the use of (usually) bilateral
communication and negotiation
between countries as a means of
resolving their differences

Source 11.12

A cartoon entitled *L'enfant Terrible* (from the British magazine *Punch* on 10 May 1890) showing Kaiser Wilhelm II 'rocking the boat'



L'ENFANT TERRIBLE!

CHORDS IN THE STERN. "DON'T GO ON LIKE THAT—OR YOU'LL UPSET US ALL!!"

1. What information is the cartoonist trying to convey regarding the Kaiser's relationship with the other European leaders?
2. What is the significance of the date of the cartoon?

Source 11.13

An extract from the Kaiser's comments to the Russian Foreign Secretary in 1900

'The Czar is only fit to live in a country house and grow turnips. The way to deal with him is to be the last to leave the room. The French are utterly disappointed with Russia and with the Czar. Of course the Russian Grand Dukes like Paris and a girl on each knee but there is no love between the two countries...'

Extract reproduced in Ralph Sawyer, *Modern World History*, Science Press, Sydney, 1988, p. 40.

Why might the comments in source 11.13 be considered inappropriate (even allowing for the fact that Britain and Russia were enemies at this time)?

Weltpolitik:
a term meaning 'world policy', used to describe Germany's desire to control more colonies, expand its international trade and achieve a status at least equivalent to that of Britain. *Weltpolitik* provided the reason for German naval expansion.

Bismarck feared the outcomes of Wilhelm's poor judgment and political ineptitude. In 1890, Wilhelm II sacked Bismarck and initiated a change of foreign policy that upset the balance of power that Bismarck had achieved. Wilhelm II oversaw the policy of *Weltpolitik* or 'world policy', whereby Germany became increasingly aggressive in a quest for status as a world power with a large number of colonies — not just a European power. Pressure groups such as the Pan-German League encouraged the Kaiser in the militaristic and nationalistic attitudes underpinning *Weltpolitik*. Where Bismarck's foreign policy had helped diffuse tensions among the great powers, Wilhelm II's *Weltpolitik* helped encourage it. Two incidents in the early twentieth century demonstrated the dangers of the Kaiser's political and diplomatic weaknesses.

The Moroccan crises

By the late nineteenth century, the great powers' desire to increase their colonial possessions had produced considerable rivalry and tensions among them. In 1904, after failed attempts to negotiate an alliance with Germany, Britain signed the *Entente Cordiale* with France. Under the terms of this 'friendly understanding', France agreed to allow Britain to extend its influence into Egypt and Britain made similar promises regarding France and Morocco. Kaiser Wilhelm viewed the agreement as an alliance against Germany and was determined to undermine it.

In 1905, the Kaiser visited Tangier in Morocco and gave a speech saying it should be free of French influence. In provoking a quarrel with France, he hoped to show that France could not rely on Britain's support. The 1906 Algeiras Conference, convened to solve the crisis, proved just the opposite. Britain supported France and so did Germany's 'ally', Italy.

Source 11.14

A comment from Sir Edward Grey, the British Foreign Secretary, in February 1906

'If there is a war between France and Germany, it will be very difficult for us to keep out of it. The Entente and still more the constant and emphatic demonstrations of affection ... have created in France a belief that we shall support them in war. If this expectation is disappointed, the French will never forgive us. There would also I think be a general feeling that we had behaved badly and left France in the lurch.'

Sir Edward Grey, quoted in J. Traynor, *Europe 1890-1990*, Macmillan, UK, 1991, p. 48.

What is the message of Sir Edward Grey's comments? What do they indicate about the Kaiser's actions?

The Moroccan crisis showed the *Entente Cordiale* to be stronger than it seemed and also encouraged Britain to settle its differences with its old enemy, Russia.