



The arms race in Europe from 1880 to 1914: a factor in the outbreak of the Great War?

military-Earth thinking notebook

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Published on 17/05/2018

Histoire & stratégie

Among the causes of the outbreak of the Great War, the existence of an arms race between the Powers is often mentioned. If, in naval terms, with the German-British rivalry, this term seems well chosen, what about land armaments? Continuing their evocation of the Great War, the Notebooks try to answer this question thanks to Lieutenant-Colonel Lahaie.

L'absence of concerted action by the nations makes the future of Europe uncertain.

At the beginning of the 20th^{century}, Europe was living in a state of anxiety. Every state is convinced that war is inevitable in the more or less long term. In order not to be caught off guard, civilian and military decision-makers know that they must prepare for it, while ignoring the advance notice they have. While the feeling of being threatened on one's borders is almost universal (neutral states are not exempt), it manifests itself differently from one country to another.

Germany - which has a high opinion of itself - believes that the world is only jealous of its success and therefore "antipathy" towards it. In the West, it feels threatened by "the French people, the most restless, the most ambitious, the most conceited of all the peoples of Europe and, in the fullest sense of the term, the most militaristic and nationalist" [1]. 1) Wounded by the affront of 1870, France in fact proclaims its need for revenge. The rise of nationalism is palpable; its leaders not only denounce German imperialism, but also make demands about the "European Union". In 1913, the election of the Lorrain Poincaré was not made to reassure Berlin, almost at the same time that the French government was in the midst of a crisis in France. the military forces were artificially inflated by the passing of the three-year law... Since the signing of the Franco-Russian military convention of 1892, then of the Entente Cordiale of 1904 (which de(which in 1907 ended with the Triple Entente thanks to the outline of an Anglo-Russian

rapprochement), Germany has had the feeling of being "surrounded". This is why the General Staff is leaning towards a preventive war against France, designated as the "main adversary"; but its offensive war plan aims at quickly defeating in the west in order to then have sufficient means to defend itself against the Russians.

In the east, there is concern for the security of East Prussia, especially as the renovation of the Tsarist army makes it more and more dangerous. Berlin knows that Russian loans have been used to develop strategic railways that will bring Grand Duke Nicholas's army into action from the very first days of the conflict. More generally, Germany - because it believes it represents a "superior" civilization - feels "surrounded by Slavic peoples full of aversion" to it [2]. Finally, within the framework of the Triple Alliance, the imperial government is aware of the need to be able to respond to possible requests for help from its Italian or Austro-Hungarian allies (which will soon throw the Reich into the war). The wars of 1912-1913 showed the instability of Central Europe and the Balkans; they reinforced Franz Joseph's fear that his multi-ethnic empire would break up under the pressure of nationalities. Since the beginning of the century, his staff had wanted to engage the army in a vast modernization reform, but the budgets were still not voted on the eve of the war. Admittedly, territorial conflicts exist with Italy, but the Redl affair demonstrated that the Habsburgs' main enemy was to the east. The Russian autocracy, under the guise of pan-Slavism, shows its determination to support the currents wishing to emancipate themselves from Habsburg rule (the Serbs in particular); there is no doubt that St Petersburg is seeking to increase its influence in this way. For his part, the Austrian Chief of Staff dreams of a war against Serbia. After its defeat in 1905, Russia has embarked on an overhaul of its armies which will enable it to confront the Austro-Hungarian Empire if necessary. But there is a lack of funds, the arms industry is in its infancy and corruption is rampant. The tsar also made it known that he attached great importance to the word given to France to support it against Germany.

In a France already obsessed by its demographic inferiority in relation to its neighbour, the feeling of the inevitability and proximity of a war has often been evoked since the Moroccan crises of 1905 and 1911. The reckless speeches of William II and the declarations of the Pan-Germanists are not conducive to reassuring governments convinced that the Kaiser sees the war as a possible continuation of his foreign policy. For his part, since the intelligence service recovered a version of the Schlieffen plan (1904), the staff has feared an abrupt attack. Finally, France must be able to fulfil its commitments to Russia if the latter is to fight against Austria-Hungary and its German ally.

In this tense environment, it is not surprising that the powers felt the need to improve or increase their military means. Can we speak of an arms race', however?

Is it an "arms race" or a "search for balance" between the Powers?

The production figures for coal or steel over the period in question are often cited as evidence of the existence of an arms race in Europe, forgetting that coal and steel are not just for the sake of it. It is often cited as evidence of the existence of an arms race in Europe, forgetting that coal and steel are not only used to make guns, especially in the era of the Eiffel steel construction or the development of the railways (the latter not only meeting military needs). Certainly, before 1914, we lived under the regime of armed peace and no one can deny that the great powers chose to equip themselves with new or more

sophisticated armaments; but it was mainly because it was necessary to keep up with technical progress and replace obsolete equipment. Moreover, they agreed to this expenditure without necessarily wishing to align more equipment than their potential adversaries. Their respective parliaments - conscious of their security duties, but equally concerned about maintaining balanced budgets - would have opposed it. Between 1900 and 1910, France spent an average of 50% of the German budget on military expenditure and the appropriations requested by the War Ministry were systematically reduced by Parliament. Thus, it seems more appropriate to speak of a "search for balance between the powers" than of an arms race before 1914. In some cases, this balance could only be achieved by forging military alliances which, in order to be honoured, required the implementation of technical procedures (partial and then general mobilisation, deployment of cover troops, etc.) that undermined the state of peace. Another argument was that all the staffs were convinced that the future war would be short and all offensive. Consequently, they saw no point in acquiring surplus equipment, or heavy equipment (likely to hamper the rapid movement of large units), or even overabundant stocks of ammunition.

The example of the French field artillery is revealing. On 13 July 1914, Charles Humbert^[3] deplored before the Senate "the absolutely flagrant and extremely perilous inferiority of our military equipment [...]. Apart from our 75 mm cannon [...], we are in a state of manifest inferiority with regard to other equipment [...]. What do we have to oppose to the German howitzers and this formidable heavy artillery [...], all modern, fast firing, high-powered and equipped with the latest improvements? Practically nothing". Messimy, the Minister of War, who had fought unsuccessfully since 1911 with the artillery directorate and the Department of Finance for the adoption of a heavy gun, gave figures to justify France's equipment policy: "On the German side, there is - and this is the difference between their situation and ours - 2.160 77-gun guns, that is 240 guns less than ours, but we must add 720 105 light howitzers, 220 150 heavy howitzers, 120 210 mortars, in total 3.320 guns, i.e. 300 more than in the French army, a greater number of which were, moreover, of large calibre". This speech caused an outcry: "If Charles Humbert's speech [...] had sounded the alarm, it was too late to be followed by an improvement and it could have been a valuable warning to the enemy," Foch recalls. A general wrote: "Our weaknesses were spread out with such insistence that it was not, it is said, without influence on the determination of the German staff to break a rupture long since stopped in his mind. Poincaré noted the same day: "Is this really the moment to give so much publicity to the inadequacies of our military organization? And wouldn't it have been better to vote earlier on the proposed laws? Now, William II can confidently repeat what he has already said to Austria to encourage it [in his firm policy towards Serbia after Sarajevo], that neither France nor Russia are currently in a state of war [...]. The revelations made in the Senate gallery about the state of the army can have dangerous repercussions abroad". On 15 July 1914, Messimy decided to make available to the armies - at the earliest in 1915 and at the latest in 1918 - the indispensable artillery, without knowing that the country would be at war a fortnight later...

The threat on the frontiers generated an undeniable "race for mobilizable manpower"...

No doubt it would be more judicious to point out the existence of a manpower race rather than an arms race, knowing that the latter is manufactured or purchased to equip the soldiers already in arms and those that the state of war will bring to the flags. The big

battalions were undeniably the big ones at the time. In 1911, Germany passed a military law increasing the number of officers by 7,000, 10,000 non-commissioned officers and 52,000 soldiers in two years. The credits for the purchase of equipment increased from 100 million (1904) to 430 million marks (1913 and 1914). A law of July 1913 was still to give 876,000 men in 1915. In any case, the Reich of 1914 lined up 870,000 men in peacetime and mobilised 3,746,000 soldiers. In France, the three-year law of August 1913 gives more troops immediately available in case of a sudden attack (25 classes mobilised); on 2 August 1914, the French army thus increases from 817,000 men to 3,580,000 (including 600,000 reservists). On paper - because they cannot be instantly available or fully equipped - Russia has 4,400,000 soldiers. Austria-Hungary has 3,000,000... The British army has 250,000 professionals; its strength rises to 780,000 in August 1914.

How can we explain this generalized inflation of manpower when we were expecting a short war and not to have to do it "with men" as in 1915-1917? The answer is provided by the war plans^[4] which required a large number of active and reserve soldiers. Did the fact of having many troops push the government to start the war? Did the conviction of being a "warrior power" play a role in the diplomatic crisis of the summer of 1914? In this nationalist and militarized Europe, it is more than likely: Vienna thought it was just a mouthful for the Serbian army, Berlin for France as the "miserable little British army", while Paris was betting on Russia as a reservoir of men to compensate for its numerical inferiority.

1) Memoirs of the Prince of Bülow 1849-1929.

2) Ibid.

3) Rapporteur of the army commission.

4) Schlieffen-Moltke for Germany, n° XVII for France.

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Release date	16/05/2018
