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THE FOREIGN POLICY OF WILHELM II

BY DR. A. KOSTER

[Dr. A. Koster, recently German Minister of Foreign Affairs, has just published a book describing more fully, and with ample documentary citations, the former Kaiser's foreign policy, under the title, *Wilhelm als Diplomat*.]

WE may summarize the foreign policy pursued by Wilhelm II for thirty years as aiming to strengthen the German military state erected by Bismarck in Central Europe, first, by building a powerful navy, and second, by forming a continental alliance, for the purpose of destroying England's supremacy as a world power. His anti-English programme was at times kept in the background. But his ambition to make Germany a naval power, rivaling and eventually superseding England, was constantly the dominating motive of his foreign policy. This is well illustrated by his obstinate refusal to accept the alliances repeatedly offered him by England.

Wilhelm's fleet was his own creation. He forced it upon Germany, in spite of the obstinate resistance of the people, buying conservative support with high tariffs upon agricultural produce, and the support of the Centre Party by school concessions and other favors. His constant additions to the fleet were the only consistent feature of Wilhelm's foreign policy. Our navy was advocated as a defensive weapon, but constructed as an offensive weapon.

No question remains as to that. Honest German citizens were deluded by Admiral Tirpitz and his press supporters, with the fable of a defensive fleet; but foreigners were never de-

ceived for a moment as to the true purpose of our armored cruisers. Many German diplomats disapproved of this policy, and warned the government against it. They were men who did not understand the task laid out for them by the navy people. Admiral Tirpitz defined their duty, in 1889, as 'to divert the attention of Germany's neighbors to other things until our naval armament is finished.'

No one could be blind to the fact—not even Wilhelm II—that this policy aroused the suspicion of England, induced that country to strengthen its fleet, and compelled it to weave a network of diplomatic alliances around Germany. The Kaiser was repeatedly reminded of this; but it did no good. He knew what was happening, and was ready to take the consequences. He might, in fact, have shouldered the consequences of his naval programme without inconvenience, if the rest of his scheme for strengthening Germany had proved successful—I mean his plan to unite all of Europe against England. His whole dream of making Germany a world empire depended on this. A navy alone was not enough. Germany's rivalry with England was practicable and possible only so far as we succeeded in winning the support of Europe against England.

Bismarck had seen, during his life time, German commerce and industry develop into a world commerce and industry. The Empire acquired its first colonies when he was Chancellor. This brought the natural rivalry between England and its new competitor to the front. It is worth our time to stop and consider how Bismarck dealt with this situation.

His continental policy was based upon the premise of doing nothing to antagonize England. His continental alliances were always conditional upon good relations with England. He stated that thesis plainly in the late 'eighties, against some of our clamorous fire-eaters: 'Lord Salisbury's friendship is worth more to me than twenty swampy colonies in Africa.' This great master of old school diplomacy knew only too well, that unless Europe could be united against England, an anti-British policy was worthless. He had to choose on one occasion between Austria and Russia. He knew that the peace of Frankfort would always prevent a reconciliation between Germany and France. He knew that our ally, Italy, would stick to the Triple Alliance only so long as it could serve as a middleman between England and Germany. Therefore, he not only avoided antagonizing England, but toward the end of his political career, when relations between Germany and Russia were becoming strained, and the danger of an alliance between Russia and France was imminent, he exerted himself to establish closer relations with Great Britain. In fact, on November 22, 1887, he suggested in a private letter to the English Premier Salisbury, a direct alliance between the two governments.

Even after Bismarck's retirement, German policy, for a time, pursued the former path. Caprivi was an outspoken enemy of any adventuresome naval or

colonial policy, so long as Germany was not protected against Russia and France, its allied enemies on the continent, by an agreement with England. It was not until the middle 'nineties that Wilhelm II began to make his ideas felt in foreign affairs. Immediately after England's relations with the Boers became critical, he began his anti-English campaign, which only terminated on August 4, 1914, when war was declared between the two countries.

Wilhelm II dreamed for a time of uniting all continental Europe. He had a high regard for Witte, the Russian statesman, because the latter advocated his idea. We pass over the question whether it was not too late in the middle 'nineties, to try to combine the Triple Alliance and the Dual Alliance into a Quintuple Alliance, such as Wilhelm II mentioned in his letter to the Tsar. Only this much is certain; that Wilhelm II was not the right man to accomplish this, and that he never seriously attempted it. He embarked upon a great navy policy. It was ridiculous to think of an alliance with Russia, while he was simultaneously advertising himself in Turkey and Asia Minor as the friend and champion of the Turks. Bismarck appreciated the true factors in a policy for conciliating Germany and Russia far better, when he proposed to leave the Tsar a free hand on the Dardanelles. You could not harness Austria-Hungary and Russia in front of the same wagon, while regarding the relations between Germany and the Danube monarchy from a continental and unworldly a point of view. <sup>1894</sup> Wilhelm did from the very beginning of his reign. Bismarck never backed up Vienna's policy in the Balkans through thick and thin, the way Wilhelm backed up his '*Niebelungen loyal councillor*.'

Wilhelm at one time considered including the 'Socialist Sansculotte Re-

public' beyond the Rhine in his continental scheme. His real opinion of those neighbors, whom he commonly referred to as 'D—d Democrats,' is indicated by the supercilious way in which he discussed with the Tsar the unwelcome probability of having to include them in his proposed alliance. But that was not important. The principal thing was that at the very time he flirted with the idea of associating the French with his continental programme, he destroyed every possibility of such an arrangement by raising the Morocco issue. He was absolutely blind to the fact that a reconciliation between Germany and France demanded a radical reversal of our policy regarding Alsace-Lorraine. German diplomacy under Wilhelm II completely failed to recognize that durable alliances demand mutual concessions, such as England and France made to each other.

Let me repeat: Germany's efforts to acquire a dominant place in the world might theoretically succeed against England, if we had the whole continent back of us. In that case, however, our whole foreign policy would have had to be revised with this continental system primarily in view. Instead of that, Germany raged about the world like a headstrong bully, challenging friend and foe alike, and winding up in the 'splendid isolation' which England planned for it. Wilhelm II not only failed to attach Russia and France to Germany, but he automatically weakened the ties which joined Italy to the Triple Alliance in precisely the degree in which he alienated England.

In 1887, Great Britain rejected Bismarck's proposal for an alliance. Germany had not yet reached the point to justify, in the mind of England, such close coöperation. In 1895, however, Great Britain suggested to the Kaiser a general scheme of coöperation in

Turkey. Germany had become stronger. A government either crushes a powerful rival or makes terms with it. England tried the latter. This occurred just at a time when Wilhelm's diplomacy definitely turned against Great Britain. England made a liberal offer: the partitioning of Turkey among Germany, Austria, and England. From Salisbury's standpoint this plan had, to quote his own statement, two great advantages: securing control of some of the most fertile agricultural regions and richest mineral districts of the world, and guaranteeing enduring friendship between England and Germany by giving each enough to occupy itself for a century to come. Echardestein, to whom we owe the most precise information concerning these negotiations, discussed the project ten years later with August Bebel. Bebel hit the nail on the head when he remarked that Wilhelm II and his advisors ought, in the interest of Germany and the world, to have been hanged for rejecting this offer.

Naturally, Great Britain did not make these overtures in 1895, and subsequently in 1898, merely out of consideration for Germany. We must bear in mind, always, that an alliance with England might under certain circumstances signify war with Russia. This consideration might cause a pacifist government to reject this alliance, but not a government like that of Wilhelm, which was ready to risk a war at any time in defense of its naval programme, its Bagdad railway project, and its annexation of Kiaochow. The probability of war was equally strong, whether we adopted the so-called 'western policy,' of friendship for England, or the so-called 'eastern policy,' of friendship for Russia. The only difference was that our eastern neighbors had already made hard and fast engagements elsewhere, while the

western power had a free hand; and that the western neighbor made an open offer, while our eastern neighbor had been scheming against us ever since the Berlin Congress.

The promise of a continental alliance under German leadership existed only in the fancy and vain self-delusion of Wilhelm II. The possibility of a fruitful world career for Germany, as Great Britain's junior partner, could not be questioned. The danger of war was greater in case of a British alliance than in case of a Russian alliance—but the prospect of success was greater. Germany, however, would have to sacrifice one thing—its dream of dethroning England from its world supremacy. That was what Wilhelm II's vanity could not tolerate. That explains why England's further overtures in 1898, which came from the English Colonial Minister, Joseph Chamberlain, failed on account of the Kaiser's opposition. At that time, the latter had again conceived a great notion of allying Germany with Russia.

These English tenders, which Echartstein brought to the Kaiser at Homburg, had been worked out after several weeks of confidential negotiations between Chamberlain, Lord Beresford and their associates, representing England, and Count Hatzfeldt, the German ambassador in London, representing our country. Naturally, they were aimed against Russia, and they formed the burden of Wilhelm's famous letter of May 30, 1898, to the Tsar. This letter showed how serious the English tender was even in the Kaiser's eyes, and that it contemplated an eventual Entente with the Triple Alliance, with the possible entry of Japan and the United States. The Kaiser boasts that he gave the offer a cool reception, and a deliberately colorless reply. Notwithstanding that 'the offer was renewed

for a third time in unmistakable terms, with liberal concessions affording such great prospective advantages for my country, yet I considered it my duty to Germany to weigh the matter carefully before I replied.'

We all know how this 'weighing the matter carefully' ended. When Wilhelm inquired what Nicholas could offer him in return for rejecting the English proposal, he did not get a serious answer. In another letter, written on August 18, Wilhelm was very exuberant in his assertion that England would never succeed in forging a continental sword out of Germany against Russia. He made merry over the fact that England, after its rebuff by Germany, was now trying to ally itself with France. He was not sharp enough to see that by this manœuvre Germany would eventually be entailed and crushed.

Before that occurred, however, Germany was once again—and for the last time—given a chance to choose its destiny. That was during England's embarrassment in South Africa. During the interval, Great Britain and France had been drawing closer together. Germany had due warning. France was working industriously to remove all sources of conflict between itself and England. Russia had acquired so strong a position that it no longer contemplated making any concessions to Germany. England's teeth were in South Africa. Chamberlain observed, as early as the autumn of 1899, that if the negotiations between England and Germany should fail, he would have no other recourse than to take up the question of an alliance with Russia and France.

Late in the autumn of that year, Wilhelm II and Bülow discussed with Chamberlain the future relations of Germany and England, at Windsor Castle. The result was that Chamber-

lain shortly afterwards, in his famous Leicester speech, stated publicly, that 'England and the German Empire are natural allies.' At the special desire of the Kaiser, he incorporated a friendly reference to the United States in this allusion. Our London embassy believed for a moment that the thing would succeed. But it had not taken into account the character of Wilhelm II, the wilful perversity of German diplomacy, and the political stupidity of the German people. Pro-Boer agitation was at its height. The Tirpitz newspapers were raging more scandalously than ever. Neither Bülow nor Wilhelm were able to check the anti-English campaign which they themselves had started, now that it had been taken up by Tirpitz and his organizations. Bülow bowed to the storm, and delivered a speech of almost unbelievable surliness in reply to Chamberlain. The seizure of the German vessel *Bundesrat* threw oil into the flames. Wilhelm had fallen completely under the influence of the military and naval fire-eaters. After his return to Berlin, he threatened England with a forty-eight hour ultimatum on account of the seizure of this vessel. So within a few weeks the former tension between the two countries was renewed.

That was next to the last act before the final tragedy. The last act was played during the first six months of 1901. England was seriously disturbed by Germany's wavering policy, and was considering the possibility of an alliance with Russia and France much more earnestly than hitherto. This time, also, Joseph Chamberlain took the lead. Conversing with his colleague, the Duke of Devonshire, in the library of Chatsworth Castle, in January, 1901, he summarized his views as follows: 'England's period of splendid isolation is over. England is ready to reach an agreement upon all

pending diplomatic questions, particularly those relating to Morocco and East Asia, with either one of the present continental alliances now in existence. Already, the idea of England's joining the Franco-Russian Entente has open champions in the cabinet. We, however, belong to the party which would prefer joining with Germany and the Triple Alliance. Should it prove, that association with Germany is impossible, we must consider coöperating with France and Russia, even though that may cost great sacrifices in Morocco, Persia, and China.'

Soon after this conversation, Queen Victoria died. Negotiations were broken off for a period. Berlin's view of the case is perhaps best indicated by the fact that Bülow and Holstein made every effort to impress upon the Kaiser the importance of not mentioning the new proposal, when he went to England to attend the funeral. Notwithstanding this, the Kaiser seems to have been moved by the spirit of the occasion to adopt a more friendly attitude than hitherto toward England's overtures.

Unhappily, what occurred in 1899 was repeated. Wilhelm had scarcely got back to Berlin before he again fell completely under the influence of the prevalent anti-English sentiment. In place of the *Bundesrat* incident, the German government was now busied with the claims of certain German firms in South Africa for damages, and the question of a Chinese war indemnity. Instead of resuming the negotiations started by Chamberlain, the German Foreign Office, to the intense delight of Russia and France, became engaged in a violent controversy with England over minor questions which were mere bagatelles in comparison with the great question of Germany's general foreign policy. Our people thought they could venture on this



course because they considered an understanding between England and Russia inconceivable. Chamberlain became nervous: 'We would gladly make extensive concessions to Germany, affording that country at least equal advantages, and perhaps greater advantages, than we ourselves would receive. Since we know, however, that every communication which Berlin receives from us is at once forwarded to St. Petersburg, it can surprise no one if we hereafter exercise the greatest reserve in our communications to Berlin.' However, his views remained the same as when he expressed them to the Kaiser and Bülow at Windsor Castle a year before. But he did not intend to burn his fingers a second time.

As a result, despite the impetuous and erratic diplomacy of Berlin, negotiations were actually resumed the following March. They looked toward a German-English alliance to which Japan might become a party. On March 25, our London embassy had agreed with Lord Lansdowne upon the possible alliance. Then, suddenly, 'the Kaiser's irritation at England's delay in the matter of the Chinese war indemnity'—(Holstein's telegram of March 25)—again upset things.

Our London embassy was almost beside itself with anger at 'the fool's paradise in Berlin.' The German government sent a special commissioner to London to insist on a speedy settlement of the indemnity question. Just at this time, Wilhelm's notorious letter to King Edward was received, in which he referred to the members of the English cabinet as 'arch block-heads.' The negotiations were carried on a little longer in this stupid, diplomatic anarchy. They were not terminated until they were transferred from London to Berlin. Alfred Rothschild, who labored constantly for a better understanding between the two coun-

tries, described the final and farcical stage of these proceedings, of which Wilhelm did not keep himself informed, as follows: 'The negotiations in London were a serious business; but what is now going on in Berlin is simply faking. No serious British statesman attaches the slightest importance to Bülow's fair-spoken, non-committal phrases. The English ambassador laughs over the blunders and tactlessness of Berlin officials. Furthermore, the government, apparently, does not know, even to-day, what it really wants.'

That was written in June, 1901. Germany did not wish such an alliance. It showed the same cold aversion which it had exhibited toward a general understanding with England, toward another British proposal, made in July, for joint action in Morocco, independently of France. Our Foreign Office ridiculed the idea of an Anglo-French alliance as much as it did that of an Anglo-Russian alliance. So history took its course. The following October, Chamberlain replied to Germany's attack upon England's military policy in South Africa, with his famous challenging speech in Edinburgh. Balfour followed him. In 1903, England and France began to negotiate, and in 1904 they signed a secret preliminary arrangement regarding Egypt and Morocco. The Anglo-Japanese alliance had been concluded in 1902. After Russia's defeat, England and Russia began negotiations which found their first public expression in the agreement of 1907. With this act, the encirclement of Germany began. The growing tension between Germany and England made Italy a useless member of the Triple Alliance. Thereupon began the final, fatal, diplomatic struggle between the disintegrating Triple Alliance and the integrating Triple Entente. Germany plunged headlong

toward the abyss. The efforts made shortly before the war, by Bethmann-Hollweg and Lichnowsky, to come to a belated understanding with England, were a death-bed repentance which did no good. The catastrophe which was to overwhelm us brought their efforts to naught.

At outs with England, hopelessly separated from France, disliked by Italy, Wilhelm II kept seeking the support from Russia which he might have had from England, but frivolously threw away. He continued to appeal, and to implore the Tsar. Finally, when after protracted efforts and unending concessions he did get what he thought was a treaty with Russia and Björkö, in 1905, it proved to be a worthless will-o'-the-wisp thing. It has never been revealed who, besides Wilhelm II signed this treaty for Germany. The Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs never signed it. The Russian Minister of the Navy signed in his place, at the side of the Tsar's signa-

ture, actually without taking the trouble to read the document, as Count Witte tells us in his memoirs — and Russia denounced the treaty almost as soon as it was signed.

This is, briefly, the history of diplomatic relations between Germany and England. Let me repeat: Theoretically, a continental policy against England might have succeeded. But so long as the indispensable preliminary conditions for such a policy were absent, it was in actual practise doomed to failure. Without the continent solidly behind Germany, the German navy was helpless. Wilhelm II built that navy, and thus led Germany to its destruction between two fires. A foreign minister with such a catastrophe on his conscience would deserve to be called before the nation's judgment seat for his acts. The German people should study their history. The question of restoring the monarchy should be pondered in the light of an historical inquiry into what it has done.

## ANATOLE FRANCE

[France, and indeed all Europe, is asking with interest not unmingled with concern what the allegiance of so many of its most brilliant literary men to extremist social theories means. We publish, below, two contributions to this debate. The first is by Franc-Nohain, from the conservative clerical daily *Echo de Paris* of January 24; and the second by George Slocombe, a special correspondent of the London *Daily Herald*, a British labor paper, from its issue of February 18.]

### I

IMMEDIATELY after the Socialist Party split at the congress of Tours, the Communists joyfully announced that Anatole France had become a convert. They made a great ado over their new adherent.

I admire the genius of Anatole

France. His character is another matter. The political opinions of a writer are determined by his character. They have nothing to do with his genius.

What benefit will the Communist Party receive from the assistance of this distinguished author? Let me, first of all, show how easy it is to refute Anatole France, the Communist,