



Volume 5. Wilhelmine Germany and the First World War, 1890-1918  
The “War Council” (December 1912)

Those who argue that Germany planned a war of aggression in 1914 have cited this meeting as evidence. In the following account of the “War Council” meeting, Chief of the General Staff Helmuth Johann Ludwig von Moltke (1848-1916) appears to favor war at the first suitable opportunity. It is another question, though, whether German policy in 1914 was guided by this calculation.

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Sunday: summoned to the palace to see His Majesty at 11 o'clock along with Tirpitz, Heeringen (Vice Admiral), and General von Moltke. H.M. with a telegraphic report on the political situation sent by the ambassador in London, Prince Lichnowski. As Grey's spokesman, Haldane informed Lichnowski that if we attack France, England will come to France's aid, for England cannot tolerate a disturbance in the European balance of power. H.M. welcomed this message as providing the desired clarification for all those who have been lulled into a false sense of security by the recently friendly English press.

H.M. painted the following picture:

Austria must deal firmly with the Slavs living outside its borders (the Serbs) if it does not want to lose control over the Slavs under the Austrian monarchy. If Russia were to support the Serbs, which she is apparently already doing (Sassonow's remark that Russia will go straight into Galicia if the Austrians march into Serbia), war would be inevitable for us. But there is hope that Bulgaria, Romania, and Albania—and perhaps even Turkey—will take our side. Bulgaria has already offered Turkey an alliance. We really went to great lengths to persuade the Turks. Recently, H.M. also tried to convince the crown prince of Romania, who stopped here on his way to Brussels, to come to an agreement with Bulgaria. If these powers ally themselves with Austria, it will free us up to throw our full weight behind a war against France. According to His Majesty, the fleet will naturally have to prepare for war against England. After Haldane's statement, the possibility of a war against Russia alone—as discussed by the chief of the Admiralty in his last talk—will not be considered. So, immediate submarine warfare against English troop transports on the Schelde River or near Dunkirk, mine warfare up to the Thames. To Tirpitz: rapid construction of additional submarines, etc. A conference is recommended for all interested naval offices. Gen. v. Moltke: “I consider a war inevitable—the sooner, the better. But we should do a better job of gaining popular support for a war against Russia, in line with the Kaiser's remarks.” H.M. confirmed this and asked the secretary of state to use the press to work toward this end. T. called attention to the fact that the navy would gladly see a major war delayed by one and a half years. Moltke said that even then the navy would not be ready, and the army's situation would continue to worsen, since due to our limited financial resources our opponents are able to arm themselves more rapidly.

That was the end of the meeting. There were almost no results.

The chief of the general staff says: the sooner war comes, the better; however, he hasn't concluded from this that we should give Russia or France, or even both, an ultimatum that would trigger a war for which they would carry the blame.

I wrote to the chancellor in the afternoon about influencing the press.

Source: Entry from the diary of Georg Alexander von Müller (December 8, 1912). Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv, Freiburg [BArch N 159/4 Fol. 169-171].

Original German text reprinted in John C. G. Röhl, *Kaiser, Hof und Staat: Wilhelm II. und die Deutsche Politik* [Kaiser, Court and State: Wilhelm II and German Politics]. Munich, 1987, pp. 175-76.

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