

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 40

“Moments of Tension”

Transcript

[music: fanfare]

On March 31, 1905, the German Kaiser, Wilhelm II, surprised the world with an unscheduled appearance at the ancient Moroccan port city of Tangier. The French had been getting more and more deeply involved in Moroccan affairs, and it was an open secret that they were interested in adding one of the last few independent states in Africa into France’s colonial empire.

And it was no secret that the Kaiser had made his appearance in Morocco to foil French ambition. The Kaiser’s visit was the throwing down of a gauntlet. Afterward, one German foreign ministry official wrote, “There will be moments of tension before this business is over.” That was an understatement.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: opening theme]

Episode 40. Moments of Tension.

In early 1905, Kaiser Wilhelm had been on a Mediterranean cruise. He had considered a stop in Morocco, but had decided against it. The Kaiser had taken an interest in Islam a few years ago, and he fancied himself an advocate for, and defender of, Muslims and their faith, at a time when the majority of the world’s Muslims lived in the British Empire. But it would be difficult to debark, because his cruise ship was too big to get into the harbor at Tangier, meaning he would have to climb down into a smaller boat, an awkward task for a man with only one good arm. And everyone knew that the French were angling for control of Morocco, so for the Kaiser to appear there would be a political statement. And he wasn’t in the Mediterranean to make political statements. He was on holiday.

And there was one more thing holding the Kaiser back. His gut was telling him this was a bad idea, and that no good would come from meddling in Morocco. As it turns out, this was a rare instance where the Kaiser’s political instincts were right on the money.

But his Chancellor, Bernhard von Bülow, and his Foreign Office very much wanted the Kaiser to visit Tangier. They saw a huge diplomatic opportunity. So they pressed the Kaiser to stop in Tangier. The Foreign Office representative on the cruise was tasked with nagging the Kaiser

about the visit, while Bülow sent regular telegrams urging the Kaiser to make the stop. Bülow even went so far as to leak news of the Kaiser's surprise visit to Morocco to the German newspapers, so that he could then cable the Kaiser and tell him that if he didn't show his face in Tangier now, it would look like he had been intimidated by the French.

Kaiser Wilhelm had plenty of other good reasons not to want to go. I mentioned his disability, which would make it hard to climb down a ladder. He would also have to ride a strange horse through the streets of Tangier. And that made him nervous for the same reason. Riding a horse was hard for the Kaiser, given that he only had the use of one arm. Learning to ride as a boy had been an embarrassing and painful ordeal for the then-crown prince, who had been thrown from horses more times than he cared to remember. Riding a strange horse in Morocco, a horse that would have been trained quite differently from a European horse, was a daunting prospect; doing it publicly, in front of a large crowd, bore a serious risk of humiliation. And given the chaos and political violence in Morocco at this time, you couldn't rule out the possibility of an assassination attempt.

But in the end, the Kaiser gave in to the pressure from his officials, and he managed to get ashore and ride the horse offered to him without embarrassing himself.

The Kaiser drew a huge, flag-waving crowd. The men fired shots into the air; the women ululated. And, predictably, the Kaiser got caught up in the moment. Although Bülow had cautioned him to stick to pleasantries, by the time the Kaiser reached the German legation and met with Moroccan dignitaries and foreign diplomats, he was ignoring Bülow's advice and boldly announcing that he was in Morocco to pay his respects to the Sultan as one sovereign to another. And he couldn't resist lecturing the French representative present that France needed to respect both Moroccan sovereignty and Germany's legitimate interests. When the French diplomat tried to explain that Morocco was on the border of Algeria, which the French government considered an integral part of France, and so France had a strong interest in stability in Morocco, the Kaiser curtly told him "*Bon jour!*" and walked away.

Among the Moroccan dignitaries the Kaiser met with that day, it was later learned, was Raisuli, the bandit chieftain, or freedom fighter, depending on your point of view, who had kidnapped a presumed US citizen and sparked a confrontation with the United States two years earlier, as you may recall from episode 24. He was also the Sultan's uncle. The Kaiser told the uncle to tell the Sultan that Germany wished him the best in his efforts to reform the Moroccan government, and advised him to make sure his rule over his country was in accord with the Koran, because, you know, what the Sultan of Morocco really needs more than anything else is Kaiser Wilhelm to remind him to be a good Muslim.

So, let's take a step back here and ask ourselves, what are Bülow and the Foreign Office up to?

First, let's remind ourselves of the political situation in the country. At the beginning of the twentieth century, there are only three independent nations in Africa: Liberia, Ethiopia—which

everyone in 1905 likes to call Abyssinia—and Morocco. The Sultan of Morocco is the now 28-year old Abdelaziz, whose incompetence at managing the affairs of his country was matched only by his inability to balance his own checkbook. Morocco was weak, unstable, heavily in debt to European countries, and ripe for the plucking. The French aspired to move in slowly, peacefully, sending military and civilian advisors and gradually taking over the reins and making Morocco into a protectorate, as they had already done in other countries.

I've already described the diplomatic machinations of the French foreign minister, Théophile Delcassé, whom Kaiser Wilhelm had called "the most dangerous man for Germany in France." Delcassé had masterminded deals with Italy and Britain by which those countries agreed to leave Morocco to the mercy of the French, and a deal with Spain to grant a portion of the Moroccan coast to that country. But Delcassé has pointedly not included Germany in any of these discussions.

There had been a multinational conference in Madrid back in 1880 on the subject of Morocco, and Spain, France, Britain, and Germany had all attended, along with Portugal and Belgium, and those countries had come to an agreement on the status of Morocco. And that's the reason why France has been so secretive in its moves against Morocco, because technically what she is doing is breaking that agreement.

So Germany, as the only major power that was a party to the Conference of Madrid, but who has not been consulted by the French as they set about rewriting the agreement, has a legitimate complaint here. But of course, there's much more going on than the fate of Morocco.

Recall that to the Germans, the new Entente Cordiale, on top of the old Franco-Russian alliance, is beginning to look like a lot like the encirclement of Germany. And Théophile Delcassé is looking like the mastermind. But the ongoing Russo-Japanese war is draining Russia—remember that Russia has just suffered a shocking defeat at the Battle of Mukden, just a couple weeks before the Kaiser made his visit to Tangier.

Now is the time for Germany to throw its weight around. The French government knows it can't win a war with Germany if Russia is sidelined, the reasoning went, and so the French will have no choice but to back down. The new Entente with Britain wasn't going to help them. The German government—for some reason—believed that if France's underhanded attempt to take control of Morocco in violation of the Madrid agreement were exposed, Britain, which had also signed the Madrid agreement, could be shamed into abandoning France. This would leave France isolated, humbled before Germany, and resentful of the British, which would have the fringe benefit of undermining the Entente and demonstrating to France that she better deal with Germany or else. Don't look to the British to bail you out.

And speaking of fringe benefits, there was also the problem of Italy. You may recall that Italy was officially part of the Triple Alliance with Austria and Germany, but for the past couple of years, she has been cozying up to France, much to the dismay of her alliance partners. The

humbling of France would have the added bonus of demonstrating to the Italians that their alliance with Germany was far more important and valuable than any agreement with the French.

The French prime minister, Maurice Rouvier, met with his army and finance ministers to discuss the state of French military preparedness. They told him bluntly the army had no supplies or equipment, no money to buy any, and morale was still very low in the wake of the Dreyfus Affair. Rouvier was close to panic. The national morale was hardly any better. Half the country was still furious with the other half. Rouvier believed that a war with Germany now would likely mean a collapse as humiliating as in 1870—and probably the overthrow of the Third Republic to boot.

The Germans kept up the pressure. They sent more officials to Morocco to negotiate German loans, which would dilute French influence in the country. They pressed Spain to renounce its agreement with France over Morocco, and they called publicly for a new international conference to debate the future of Morocco, and German diplomats in Paris privately let the prime minister know that Germany wanted Delcassé out of the foreign ministry and out of the French government.

As Germany increased the pressure on France, French foreign policy came under attack in the Chamber of Deputies. The French socialist leader Jean Jaurès attacked Delcassé, arguing that it was France's imperialist policy toward Morocco, not the Kaiser's visit, that had triggered the crisis, and that Delcassé was escalating tensions by refusing to negotiate with the Germans. This domestic political criticism forced Delcassé to invite the Germans to bilateral talks on Morocco, but Chancellor Bülow, sensing French weakness, refused bilateral talks and insisted on a full multinational conference, like the one in 1880, to work out the future of Morocco.

In June of 1905, Rouvier bowed to German pressure and forced Delcassé out of the government. He took over the foreign ministry portfolio himself and represented France in negotiations with the Germans, and in July agreed to the conference the Germans were demanding. The conference would begin in January, 1906, in the Spanish port city of Algeciras, which English-speaking people usually call Algeciras, and which lies just across the Strait of Gibraltar from Tangier, which seems appropriate. By the way, if you are hearing the name “Algeciras” and thinking “that reminds me of ‘Al-Jazeera,’ the Qatar-based satellite TV network,” well, you're right. It does. And that's not a coincidence. “Al-Jazeera” means “the island” or “the peninsula” in Arabic, and Algeciras was called “Green Island” during the 700 or so years it was under Arab rule, and the name stuck.

[music: “Arabesca” from *Danzas Españolas*]

The countries participating in the 1906 Algeciras conference would include the attendees from the Madrid conference of 1880, Britain, France, Germany, Spain, Portugal, and Belgium, along with Austria, Russia, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden, the United States, and Morocco herself. It was going to be a big deal.

So far, everything was working out to Bülow's satisfaction. But his luck was about to change. The first sign of trouble was the position of the Roosevelt administration in the United States. Presidents McKinley and Roosevelt had articulated America's Open Door Policy in China, by which they meant that America supported equal trade rights for all nations in China, as opposed to the dividing up of China into spheres of influence of various European powers, since that would have left American trade out in the cold. Bülow had reasoned that the US could be depended upon to take a similar position with respect to Morocco at the Algeiras conference, which would line up nicely with Germany's position. However, when the German ambassador took up the question with Theodore Roosevelt, Roosevelt rebuffed the Germans, telling the ambassador that Morocco was a much smaller country than China, and America's interest in the place was correspondingly smaller, and he couldn't see that his administration had much to gain by making a big deal out of a place very few Americans cared about.

The British government also had concerns that the US would support the German position, but Roosevelt laid those to rest when he told a British diplomat that Kaiser Wilhelm's foreign policy was "one of violent and wholly irrational zig-zags. I should never dream of counting on his friendship."

In France, the public was growing increasingly hostile to German bullying, and by the end of summer, even Prime Minister Rouvier was talking tougher. Besides the public support for a harder line against Germany, the French government was also getting private diplomatic assurances from the British government that Britain stood by its agreement to support French ambitions in Morocco. In July, a Royal Navy squadron visited the French port of Brest for the Bastille Day celebrations, which was, of course, fully intended as a public display of British support for France.

As for Russia, the Germans had some secret diplomacy going on there that Bülow had high hopes for. For years now, ever since the Russian Emperor Nikolai II took the throne, in fact, his older cousin, Kaiser Wilhelm, has been after him about renewing the old alliance between Germany and Russia.

Nikolai has mostly been listening politely but noncommittally, but the Kaiser's personal diplomacy seemed to pay off after the Dogger Bank incident of last October. It was a low point for Anglo-Russian relations, already strained because of Britain's alliance with Russia's enemy, Japan. Britain seemed to be working behind the scenes to undermine the Russian war effort, while France was disappointingly indifferent and had to be badgered by Russian diplomats to so much as open French colonial ports to the Baltic Fleet. The Kaiser, in contrast, had been egging the Russians on, and the Germans were only too happy to sell coal to the Russian fleet.

So in a fit of pique, Nikolai had written to Wilhelm and said that he was ready to discuss that alliance, and Wilhelm should send him a draft treaty to look over. The Kaiser jumped at the invitation, and the treaty was in the Russian Emperor's hands in a matter of days. The concept of

the treaty was simple enough: If a third power attacks either Russia or Germany, the other will enter the war in defense of the country attacked. The treaty proposal wasn't specific about the third power, but of course both Wilhelm and Nikolai were thinking of Britain. Nikolai wanted to consult with the French about this new alliance, but Wilhelm told the Russian Emperor that if this treaty were signed, France would have no choice but to get on board with the new alliance, and the major Continental powers would all be united, and the British left out in the cold. Which was totally the point.

But there were unanswered questions, most of all about Germany's alliance with Austria and Russia's alliance with France. What would Germany do in the event of a war between Russia and Austria? What would Russia do in the event of a war between France and Germany? Nikolai asked Wilhelm if it would be all right to include France in these negotiations. Wilhelm told him that it wouldn't be appropriate to allow Republican rabble into the deliberations of Imperial personages such as they.

But as 1904 passed into 1905, Bloody Sunday happened, and as you know, Russia became embroiled in a quasi-revolution. As Nikolai turned his attention to his domestic troubles, the treaty negotiations went onto the back burner.

But by summer, things had changed again. France had been cowed into agreeing to the Algeiras Conference, and Germany was riding high. In Russia, Nikolai had tentatively agreed to a national legislature, the Duma, which quieted the revolutionaries for a time. The Russian Baltic Fleet had been decisively beaten at the Battle of the Tsushima Strait, and peace talks were about to begin with Japan.

That July, the German and Russian Emperors left on Baltic cruises aboard their yachts. Few people knew that they planned to rendezvous secretly off the island of Björkö. Wilhelm came over to the Russian Emperor's ship and listened sympathetically while Nikolai went on about how the new Anglo-French Entente was nothing less than a conspiracy against Russia. Wilhelm told Nikolai he had the remedy for that little problem and pulled out another copy of his proposed treaty. Nikolai took the treaty, flopped into a chair, and began to read it. The Kaiser stood by, nervously, sweat dripping down his back, trying not to let his anxiety show. At last, Nikolai said, "Excellent!" Wilhelm handed him a pen, and the treaty was signed.

Kaiser Wilhelm was overjoyed. With this alliance done, Austria and Italy would have to come on board, too. Then Sweden. France would have no choice but to join in, and who knows? Perhaps even the Japanese, or the Americans.

The Kaiser was the only one who was overjoyed. His chancellor, Bernhard von Bülow, reacted by tendering his resignation. The Kaiser had made a change in the treaty to make it more palatable to Nikolai; he had agreed to limit the scope of the alliance to Europe. But as far as Bülow was concerned, that made the alliance all but worthless. To Bülow, the most important

benefit of the alliance with Russia was Russia's ability to put pressure on the British Empire in India or the Far East. A Europe-only alliance meant little.

The Kaiser "persuaded" Bülow to stay on as chancellor, but in St. Petersburg, the reaction of the Russian foreign minister, Alexander Izvolsky, was every bit as negative. He told his Emperor that Kaiser Wilhelm had pulled a fast one, by conning him into signing a treaty that was incompatible with Russia's alliance with France. A couple of months later, Nikolai wrote Wilhelm to explain that Russia could not be part of this new alliance unless France also agreed to it, which was another way of saying the deal was dead.

Meanwhile, the constitutional reforms Nikolai had had to agree to in order to end the Revolution of 1905 included reduced censorship of Russian newspapers. Once Russian newspapers could speak more freely about world affairs, it soon became apparent, just as in Britain and France, that the Russian public was displaying a surprising amount of hostility toward Germany, so much so that even Emperor Nikolai was feeling the pressure to take a harder line.

And speaking of pressure, the Russian economy was in a shambles following the war with Japan. She desperately needed foreign investment to get the machinery moving again. When the Russian government approached the French for reconstruction loans, the French government told them they would have to wait until after the Algeiras conference, implying that French money was contingent on how Russia voted at the conference.

The Russians also sounded out the Germans about loans, but Wilhelm was in a snit about the rejection of his treaty, and, proving once again that the Kaiser never misses an opportunity to miss an opportunity, he decreed that Russia would get no German money.

In December, 1905, as you may recall, Prime Minister Balfour resigned, and the Liberal leader, Henry Campbell-Bannerman became the first Liberal Prime Minister in ten years, and soon thereafter the Liberals would win a huge electoral victory and a wide majority in the House of Commons. The new Liberal Foreign Secretary was Sir Edward Grey. Grey would hold that position for eleven years, making him the longest-serving foreign secretary in British history. He was born in 1862 to an old landowning family, and had his own estate and income by the age of twenty-one. He was first elected to the House of Commons at the age of 23, making him at that time the youngest member of the House. He served as parliamentary under-secretary to Lord Rosebery, when Rosebery was Foreign Secretary, during the last Liberal government of 1892-95.

Strangely enough, Grey had never so much as visited a foreign country when he became Foreign Secretary, but he had strong ideas about foreign policy. In Berlin, the German government was pleased to see the Conservatives out and the Liberals in; they figured the Liberals would be less aggressive and more willing to make peace with Germany. But that was not how it went. Grey actually saw little reason to change the previous Conservative government's foreign policy. It was, surprisingly, only after the Liberals took over that British and French military planners

began discussing contingency plans for deploying British Army units to the continent in the event of a war between France and Germany.

[music: “Arabesca” from *Danzas Españolas*]

The conference in Algeciras opened on January 16, and it became clear almost at once that the Germans had no support. The net result of Germany’s diplomatic maneuverings of the past year was to make it all too apparent that Germany was deliberately picking a fight with France. Britain and Russia strongly supported France. So did Spain; Germany’s attempts to pry Spain away from France had come to nothing. Italy remained non-committal, while the US pressed the Germans to find a compromise. Only Austria and Morocco supported the German position publicly, although even Austria was privately telling the Germans the same thing the Americans were: For God’s sake, cut a deal and end this thing, already!

As for the poor Moroccans, they had seen the conference as a sort of international court that was calling France to account for its conduct in Morocco, and they were fully expecting the French to get a reprimand for bullying the Moroccans. To their dismay, what they learned was that most of the world was more than willing to see France take control of their country.

I should take a moment here to be specific about what issues were before this conference. France had already loaned Morocco a lot of money. The French had taken control of many of Morocco’s customs houses and were collecting Moroccan import tariffs themselves, to insure these loans got repaid. But given the breakdown of law and order in Morocco, as we’ve seen, and the shambolic state of Morocco’s finances, the French also wanted to take control of Moroccan police forces and set up a Moroccan state bank to balance government finances and insure the value of Moroccan currency by keeping the country on the gold standard. Needless to say, the French wanted the new Moroccan state bank to be run by...the French.

In other words, the French had major interests in Morocco, including the fact that Algeria was right next door, and Morocco had proven incapable of managing her own affairs, so the French had a legitimate interest in stepping in and putting things right themselves. Of course, what France was claiming amounted to taking control of the Moroccan government, or at least, of significant parts of it.

The German argument, in contrast, was that this was giving France too much, and that if intervention into Moroccan affairs was necessary, it ought to be an international intervention, not a purely French one.

And so the conference was deadlocked. The Germans would not give in, but they would not get their way. Bülow had tried to do what Bismarck had done so skillfully in the previous century: pry the other great powers apart from each other while making Germany the friend of all. But instead, Germany’s bullying made everyone question German motives.

By February, there were voices in the German Foreign Office calling for war with France. And some in the British Foreign Office, including the Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey, were expecting war in the spring, as soon as the weather became warm enough for a German offensive. Grey remarked that if war did come, it would be very difficult for Britain to stay out of it, given how high French expectations had been raised by British shows of friendship. If Britain stayed neutral, Grey said, “the French will never forgive us.”

Speaking of British shows of friendship, the Royal Navy made it a point to send the Atlantic Fleet and the Mediterranean Fleet both to Gibraltar in February. Gibraltar lies just across the Bay of Gibraltar from Algeciras, where the conference is being held. Gee, do you think they’re trying to send a message?

February 1906 was a big month for the Royal Navy. Besides the show of force at Gibraltar, it was also the month that the navy launched a new battleship that was going to change everything. Her name was *HMS Dreadnought*, and she is the reason that the very word *dreadnought* is today synonymous with “battleship.” That was a huge development, and I’ll have more to say about it next week—like, the entire episode—but for now let’s just say it was a quantum leap forward in battleship design, and suddenly Germany’s naval buildup didn’t look as amazing as it did back in January.

It was clear that Germany’s diplomatic position was untenable. Neither the Kaiser nor the Chancellor was willing to go to war over Morocco, so in March the German government gave in. They accepted the so-called compromise plan offered to Germany, which basically gave France everything she wanted, but provided a few fig leaves to cover up the German humiliation. There would be some international involvement in the Moroccan state bank, and although the French would largely be running to Moroccan police, the top commander would be Swiss. The parties in Algeciras signed their agreement and went home.

Germany’s plan to drive a wedge between Britain and France failed spectacularly. It left Germany isolated, and Britain and France closer together. If the Entente had been merely a colonial agreement at first, it was no longer. It was now an informal alliance aimed at containing Germany. Sir Edward Grey would continue his policy toward France, a policy of signaling to the French a British willingness to defend France in a war with Germany, while at the same time truthfully denying to the British Cabinet and the House of Commons that the French had ever been given any concrete promises about British assistance in the event of war. He would keep doing this dance until it catches up to him in 1914.

What’s shocking about the Morocco crisis is how close Europe came to going to war over an issue that really didn’t matter very much. France had an interest in taking control of Morocco perhaps, but not one worth igniting a general European war over. On the other hand, French control over Morocco puts neither Germany nor any other European country in danger. And yet it is not too difficult to imagine a world in which the Great War starts here. It is a sign of the rot

that underlies modern Europe, a Europe too willing to go to war today to protect hypothetical benefits, or prevent imagined disasters, that lay years in the future.

You may be wondering why I'm not giving out a Kaiser Wilhelm award this week. Well, the truth is that you can't lay the blame for this fiasco at the feet of the Kaiser. You'll recall for instance that the Kaiser didn't want to go to Tangier in the first place. Mostly for personal reasons, true, but he had also favored doing a deal with France alone and opposed the conference. The Kaiser had correctly predicted the outcome. He was also against starting a war over Morocco, and he had said so, over and over, during the crisis. The Kaiser was more worried about the socialists, who had been organizing large demonstrations at this same time, in protest over the funky Prussian electoral system that kept shutting them out. Wilhelm viewed the socialists as a much graver threat to Germany than French meddling in Morocco. So, I can't believe I'm saying this, but the Kaiser had it right, and it was a shame that his government ministers weren't listening to him.

Oh, that hurt.

We'll have to stop there for today. If you like *The History of the Twentieth Century*, why not like our Facebook page? Follow us on Twitter, and visit our website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com. Subscribe to the podcast at the iTunes store, and never miss an episode. And while you're there, why not leave a rating and review? That will help other people find the podcast, people who, hopefully, will enjoy it as much as you. And I hope you'll join us next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we look at *HMS Dreadnought*. Launched in 1906, she changed the face of naval warfare, and triggered arms races all over the world. (Like I haven't been dropping hints like bricks for two weeks that that's our next topic.) Anyway, that's next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing? Our old friend Georges Clemenceau had returned to politics in 1902, getting himself elected to the Senate. There were French legislative elections in May 1906, just after the Morocco crisis was resolved. Clemenceau became minister of the interior under the new prime minister, Ferdinand Sarrien. Despite his left-leaning past, he was staunchly anti-German and as interior minister, used the police to break up strikes by miners and wine growers. When Sarrien resigned that October, Clemenceau became the new prime minister.

As for his move from left to right, politically, Clemenceau famously explained it by saying, "A young man who *isn't* a socialist hasn't got a heart; an old man who *is* a socialist hasn't got a head," a sentiment which has been repeated ever since, although frequently misattributed, often to Winston Churchill.

[music: closing theme]