

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 69

“Some Damned Silly Thing”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

Otto von Bismark reputedly predicted in 1898 that if a general war were to erupt in Europe, it would come out of “some damned silly thing in the Balkans.”

In 1912, The Italo-Ottoman war ended with what might generously be described as a marginal Italian victory. The benefits to Italy proved to be elusive at best. *De jure* semi-sovereignty where she had already had *de facto* sovereignty? Being beaten to a draw by the failing Ottoman Empire? A handful of islands in the Aegean? Hardly worth the huge debt the Italian government had incurred, which was far in excess of what had been expected, since warfare in 1912 is way more costly than it had been even a couple of decades ago, which we have already seen, but was a lesson the nations of that era have not yet learned.

And that’s without considering the biggest cost of all: the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. For half a century, the great powers have propped up the Ottoman Empire against the day when she might fall, and the whirlwind strike southeastern Europe. Has that day arrived?

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 69. Some Damned Silly Thing.

In episode 66, we followed the course of the Italo-Ottoman War of 1911 and 1912. Let’s review a couple of key points about that war.

There were two things pushing the Italian government into war with the Ottoman Empire. The more pragmatic of the two, if I can put it that way, was the Italian desire to take control of Libya. Italy has been coveting Libya for a long time. She had largely missed the scramble for territory in Africa, particularly the north African coast, which, if you are an Italian nationalist and romantic—but I repeat myself—you see as a natural place for Italian colonial expansion because, Roman Empire. But as we have seen, France grabbed Algeria, then Tunisia, then Britain grabbed Egypt, and those two powers’ regard for Italian claims on the region might best be described as “utter contempt.” Italy began putting the moves on Libya after that, with the tacit blessings of Britain and France, but the two Moroccan crises showed that sometimes it took the approval of

more than two great powers to win a colony. Anxious to forestall a visit to Tripoli by Kaiser Wilhelm, or perhaps a German gunboat showing up at Benghazi, Italy made her move in 1911 to nail down Libya as an Italian possession.

The second reason Italy went to war was to appease domestic political discontent. Italy has been plagued with a sense of dissatisfaction. Italian unity hasn't been the bonanza it was sold as. Italy was, at best, a second-rate great power, if it was a great power at all, and the lack of respect other nations were showing her was impossible to ignore or dismiss. It was widely believed in those times, that war earned a nation respect abroad, and at home engendered unity and built up what we might call the national character. Remember how then-Assistant Secretary of the Navy Theodore Roosevelt foresaw the coming Spanish-American War and remarked, "I should welcome any war, for I think this country needs one."

But as we saw back in episode 66, Italy's dilemma was to hit the Ottoman Empire hard enough to make it give up Libya, but not so hard as to shatter it. This week, we return to the consequences in the Balkans, and ask whether Italy had properly calibrated its war on the Ottomans.

The Balkan states that surround the Ottoman Empire's European territories—Montenegro, Serbia, Rumania, Bulgaria, and Greece—have been coming together in recent years. I've already mentioned the trade agreement between Serbia and Bulgaria. That was the first step. In the mix of ethnic groups that populate those European Ottoman territories, (which I am going to call Macedonia, for the sake of convenience) there are peoples who are ethnic Greeks, ethnic Serbs, and ethnic Bulgarians. Also Albanians, who, you may recall, revolted just two years ago. The revolt was put down, but Albanian resentment still simmers. Albanians, historically, have been some of the Ottoman Empire's most loyal subjects, so when the Ottomans start losing *them*, you know the end is near.

Russia's new foreign minister, Sergei Sazonov, and her ambassador in Serbia, Nikolai Hartwig, have been encouraging these Balkan states. Sazonov and Hartwig both took their positions in the wake of Russia's humiliating diplomatic defeat after the Austrian annexation of Bosnia, and both men were determined not to let anything like that happen again. Hartwig in particular worked closely with the Serbian government. He was an ardent supporter of Serbia; some said he was more Serbian than the Serbs. But this Balkan League the Russians were encouraging was not aimed at the Ottomans, but at Austria. The idea was to unite the Balkan states as a firewall against further Austrian expansion.

But these Balkan states, once they started getting together, began to cast envious eyes on Ottoman Macedonia. At first glance, you might think it absurd that a collection of poor Balkan states might take on an Empire, but it's not as crazy as it sounds. Christians in Macedonia are already fighting a low grade insurgency against the Empire, for one thing, blowing up mosques

and police stations and so on, with some covert support from the Balkan League governments. For another thing, Italy has just dealt the Empire a blow, so maybe the time is ripe?

But what about the Great Powers? They've supported the status quo in the Balkans for over half a century now. If the Ottomans were driven out of Europe, the result would be chaos at least, and quite possibly a great war, right? Well, that's been the policy of some of the Great Powers, particularly Britain, but after fifty years, it began to sound like the boy who cried wolf.

Where were the Great Powers when Austria annexed Bosnia? Where was their defense of the status quo then? And yet, nothing happened. Austria annexed Bosnia, and the world kept turning. Where were the Great Powers as Italy went to war with the Ottoman Empire over Libya? Where was their defense of the status quo? And yet, nothing happened. Italy took Libya and some islands in the Aegean, and the world kept turning.

From the point of view of the Great Powers, an alliance of the usually quarrelsome Balkan states looked attractive. Perhaps these local Balkan powers could take responsibility for stabilizing the region, leaving one less headache for the major powers to worry about. The Russian ambassadors in Serbia and Bulgaria worked together to organize this new Balkan alliance. In Serbia, Nikolai Hartwig was enthusiastic, but the Russian ambassador in Sofia tried unsuccessfully to warn his superiors of the very real risk that a Balkan alliance might act offensively.

Meanwhile, in the Ottoman Empire, the Young Turk movement, now known formally as the Committee of Union and Progress, or CUP, had experienced a split. The CUP was the ruling party at the time, but the continued unrest in Macedonia and the ongoing war against Italy was costing the CUP a lot of support. Some disgruntled Young Turks left that party and formed a new opposition party, The Freedom and Accord Party, in November 1911. Some 70 members of the Ottoman Chamber of Deputies joined this new party.

By March 1912, as the Italo-Ottoman War raged on inconclusively, Serbia and Bulgaria announced that they had agreed to a treaty. But the really significant parts of the treaty were kept secret: that Serbia and Bulgaria were dividing up Ottoman Macedonia between the two of them, agreeing to make Russia the arbiter of any disputes over the spoils. Bulgaria even agreed to come to the aid of Serbia should that country be attacked by the Austrians.

Greece traditionally maintained claims against Ottoman Macedonia too, claims that overlapped with Bulgaria's, and in the past Greek hostility had helped keep Bulgarian ambitions in check. But after the treaty with Serbia, Bulgaria worked out its differences with Greece. The new Greek Prime Minister, Eleutherios Venizelos, was from Crete, and he was prepared to make concessions in Macedonia in exchange for Bulgarian support for Greek claims on Crete and the Aegean islands. By September, Montenegro had been brought into the fold, and Bulgaria now had agreements with three of its Balkan neighbors.

In Turkey, the ruling CUP called a general election in April, hoping to vote the dissident Freedom and Accord Party out of the Chamber. The CUP won 269 out of 275 seats in the Chamber of Deputies, with the Freedom and Accord Party retaining only six, but the election result was marred by massive fraud and vote rigging, which further diminished the credibility of the CUP. The Freedom and Accord Party aligned itself with disgruntled right-wing military officers calling themselves the Savior Officers, and launched a coup in July 1912, overthrowing the Young Turks once again and restoring a more conservative, right-leaning government.

And while all this turmoil was going on in Constantinople, there continued to be unrest in Macedonia, and more tales of Turkish troops firing on Christian civilians. The Albanians had risen up in their second revolt in as many years, there was unrest in Arabia, and the war with Italy was dragging on. In September, Constantinople capitulated to the Albanian rebels, and agreed to grant Albanian autonomy.

The Ottoman Empire looked like it was on the brink, and the four Balkan states—Greece, Bulgaria, Serbia, and Montenegro—decided it was time to make their move. Now, you might look at a map and think it foolhardy of these four small countries to take on the sprawling Ottoman Empire. And that's what most military analysts in Europe thought, too.

But the Imperial Army was distracted in Libya and Arabia, not to mention the coups and countercoups in the capital that were essentially two factions of the Army struggling for the right to run the government. The Ottoman Army had about 300,000 soldiers in its European territories, but 100,000 of those were in Thrace, protecting the capital. The other 200,000 were scattered across the Macedonian territories, trying to maintain order there, with little success.

Against that, the four Balkan states could collectively mobilize a total of 800,000 soldiers, and they would be attacking into Ottoman territory from all sides, meaning the Turkish troops would be defending their territory on all sides, which is a position you absolutely do not want to be in, if you are the defender.

So while in the old days, 12 years ago, the small Balkan states needed great power patrons to back them up in any confrontation with the Empire, by 1912, this was no longer the case, and the new Balkan League had the freedom to move as it wished. It did have some tepid support from Russia, which executed what it called a "trial mobilization" along its borders with Germany and Austria, a none-too-subtle way of warning those two powers not to get involved. Some of the other great powers, like Britain, were scrambling to restrain the Balkan states from pressing forward on their own. But it was already too late.

On October 6, the four Balkan states agreed among themselves that all of them would attack the Ottoman Empire within the next ten days. The first one out of the gate, surprisingly, was little Montenegro, which was eyeing the Albanian town known then by its Italian name of Scutari, and today by its Albanian name of Shköder, just across the border, and also Novi Pazar, that little

strip of territory between Montenegro and Serbia, which the Austrians had pulled out of back in 1908, remember that?

On October 12, as you may recall, Italy and the Empire signed a peace agreement, ending their war. On October 18, the other three Balkan states joined in their own offensives.

The Bulgarians surprised the Ottomans by attacking, not to the southwest, where there were ethnic Bulgarians in Macedonia, and where feelings of nationalism (not to mention feelings of not wanting the Greeks to get there first) might have dictated, but rather to the southeast, toward Constantinople. Tsar Ferdinand, it seemed, had dreams of succeeding where the Russians had failed 35 years ago, and taking Constantinople outright. It is said that Ferdinand kept the robes and regalia of a Byzantine Emperor in his closet (he is said to have obtained them from a theatrical supply company) and kept them ready for the day when he rode in triumph into Tsargrad.

So that's why the bulk of the Ottoman army was deployed farther west, in Macedonia, leaving the capital relatively undefended. Those 200,000 Ottoman soldiers in Macedonia were in the unenviable position of trying to hold the center against attackers who outnumber them two to one and are coming at them from the north and the south. Meanwhile, the remaining 100,000 Ottoman soldiers in Thrace, guarding the approaches to Constantinople, are in the even more unenviable position of facing a surprise attack by a Bulgarian force triple their size.

And, of course, the Ottoman government was in turmoil, as we have seen, there was unrest in the Empire's Arab territories, as usual, and also remember that the best Turkish officers were in Libya right now, overseeing the fight against the Italians, and they had no easy way to reach the new Balkan theatre of war. I've mentioned before how the Sultan Abdul Hamid II allowed the navy to deteriorate during his reign. In 1912, the not inconsiderable Greek Navy has control of the Aegean, and is in a position to intercept any attempt to move troops or supplies into the Balkans by sea. Even Mustafa Kemal, who would come to be known as "the Great Turk," was in Libya at this time, and could only receive with mounting alarm the news that Greek and Bulgarian forces were closing in on Salonika, his home town, where his mother still lived! For the rest of his life he would regret his decision to volunteer to serve in Libya, and place himself where he would be unable to reach his home town when it needed him the most.

And if the Ottoman situation isn't bad enough, on October 21, the Ottoman command, not yet aware of how large the Bulgarian force bearing down on their capital was, ordered the army in Thrace to go on the offensive. They did, and they were routed in two days, abandoning their heavy artillery, and, in some cases, even their rifles, in their hasty retreat. The Ottoman fortress at Edirne, the city known in ancient times as Adrianople, was surrounded, and the Bulgarian army was within fifty miles of Constantinople.

By this point, Russia, which sees Serbia as an ally but is distinctly tepid toward Bulgaria, pan-Slavic ideals notwithstanding, began to warn Bulgaria that it might intervene to prevent Bulgaria from taking Constantinople. These warnings appear to have had no effect.

At the same time, Serbian armies were moving south into Kosovo and Macedonia, and, taking advantage of the small Montenegrin Army's inability to do more than get bogged down in the siege of Scutari, moved into Novi Pazar, taking territory that by their agreement was supposed to go to Montenegro, which gives you some idea of how long this Balkan alliance is going to last.

[music: "Farewell of Slavianka"]

The music you just heard, by the way, is the march "Farewell of Slavianka," by the Russian composer Vasily Ivanovich Agapin. It was composed in 1912, in honor of the Slavic women who supported their men during the First Balkan War. (*Slavianki* means "Slavic women" in Russian.) It will become a Russian patriotic song two years from now, when it becomes the lot of Russian women to say farewell to their men.

Greeks also fought in the Balkan Wars, and the Greek Army was under the personal command of the 44-year old Crown Prince Constantine, eldest son and heir apparent of the Greek King, George I. It is said that he was christened Constantine in the hope that he would one day take Constantinople and rule as the restored Emperor Constantine XII. Spoiler alert: that is not going to happen, but he will become King Constantine of the Hellenes, and sooner than he thinks. King George will be assassinated by an anarchist in March 1913, just as the First Balkan War is winding down, and Constantine will take the throne.

Under Constantine's command, the Greek Army also surprised the Ottomans by not attacking in the expected direction, that is, north, into the Greek mountains. Rather, the Greek Army made a beeline for the Aegean port city of Salonika, the ancient city of Thessalonica, which to the Greeks is as Greek as Athens, and if you don't believe them, check out the table of contents of the New Testament. On November 7, the Greek Army reached the outskirts of Salonika, and the following day a Bulgarian division arrived.

Apart from Salonika being Mustafa Kemal's mother's home town, you may recall it was also the place of exile of the previous Sultan, Abdul Hamid II, who had reigned for over thirty years, during which time the Ottomans had committed multiple atrocities, in Macedonia and elsewhere, and there was a very real fear for his safety should he fall into Greek or Bulgarian hands. On November 8, as the Ottoman commander in Salonika was negotiating the surrender of the city with the Greeks and the Bulgarians, Abdul Hamid was spirited away from the city by the German Navy and returned to Constantinople. The Greeks shrewdly offered the Ottomans the more generous terms, including free passage out of the city for all Ottoman officers and soldiers, and Salonika surrendered to the Greeks.

By this time, the main Bulgarian army had reached the Sea of Marmara, meaning that the Ottoman-controlled territory in Europe had been reduced to Constantinople and its environs, the European side of the Bosphorus, and the Gallipoli peninsula, the European side of the Dardanelles. But here the Ottoman defense firmed up, as the Ottoman lines were reinforced by fresh troops crossing over from Anatolia.

And speaking of atrocities, the Balkan League armies were ruthless in their treatment of any ethnic Turk or other Muslim civilians unfortunate enough to be caught behind their lines, and the result was a flood of refugees into the Turkish capital, turning Constantinople into a huge refugee camp. The Hagia Sophia and the German embassy turned into field hospitals for sick and wounded refugees.

On November 17, Bulgaria began what was intended to be the final push to take Constantinople. Unfortunately for the Bulgarians, the combination of Turkish reinforcements bolstering the Ottoman line even as Bulgarian supply lines stretched longer and longer meant a bloody attack that ended in stalemate.

That same day, November 17, on the other side of the Balkans, the first Serbian units reached the Adriatic Sea. This provoked a diplomatic crisis with Austria. Remember that Austria is deeply hostile to Serbia, a state it considers a threat to its own empire. Austria just now has a new foreign minister. Her former foreign minister, Count von Aerenthal, died of leukemia earlier in the year, and was replaced by the 49-year old Count Leopold Berchtold, reputedly the richest man in the Empire, and now the youngest and most inexperienced foreign minister among the Great Powers.

When the war in the Balkans had broken out, the Austrian foreign ministry had declared that Austria would not oppose the expansion of Serbia at the expense of the Ottoman Empire, on one condition: that Serbia not occupy land anywhere on the Adriatic coast. Austria regards the Adriatic as “her” sea, and maintains a naval fleet at Pola. The port city of Trieste, the fourth largest city in the Empire, after Vienna, Budapest, and Prague, is Austria’s window on the world. Austria is already engaged in a dreadnought race with Italy with control of the Adriatic as the stakes, and so the Austrians regard it as vital that Serbia not be given access to the Adriatic and become yet another rival for naval supremacy.

Austria’s military chief, Baron Conrad von Hötzendorf, who had been urging war against Serbia for years, then took a break from urging war against Serbia during the Italo-Ottoman War to urge that Austria take advantage of that conflict to stab its supposed ally Italy in the back, was now back to urging that Austria take advantage of the war in the Balkans to declare war on Serbia. Conrad would, in fact, spend most of his tenure as Austria’s chief of staff advocating war against either Italy or Serbia, and would, of course, eventually get both his wishes, but not for another year or so.

The war in the Balkans was worrisome enough for Austria-Hungary that the Imperial government was even able to persuade the Hungarian half of the Empire to agree to an increase in military spending, something that hardly ever happened. But in November, when Serbian troops reached the Adriatic shore, the Austrians felt they needed to act. Austria took the huge step of mobilizing its army along the Serbian and Russian frontiers.

Rapid mobilization was regarded as the key to winning a war at the time, and for Austria to take this step in 1912 would be like the United States or the Soviet Union putting their nuclear bombers on station or putting their missile commands on alert during the Cold War. It was a tangible step toward all-out war, and a risky move.

In St. Petersburg, Emperor Nikolai and his government debated whether to call for a Russian mobilization in response. The Russian war minister and the military chiefs almost convinced the Emperor to order mobilization. Their argument was that Austria had forced Russia to back down during the Bosnian crisis of 1908, when the Russian military was still weakened and in turmoil from the Russo-Japanese War, and now it was payback time. But the civilian ministers, particularly the prime minister and the foreign minister Sazonov, denounced the idea, warning that any Russian war on Austria would certainly pull in Germany, and Russia was not yet ready for that. The peace camp prevailed, this time, and a general war in Europe was averted, for now.

But this discussion and that decision were not known in Vienna or Berlin. Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Imperial throne and the Austrian commander-in-chief, traveled personally to Berlin to seek assurance from the German government that it would stand by Austria if she were attacked. The German chancellor, Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg, and the German foreign minister, Alfred von Kiderlen-Wächter, privately assured Austria of German support, but hoped to work together with the British to negotiate a solution to the Balkan crisis.

And then there was the impulsive, mercurial, unpredictable Kaiser Wilhelm II. Pity the poor German minister who has to decipher which way the Kaiser was leaning during this conflict. Germany was allied with Austria, of course. But on the other hand, the Kaiser also fancied himself the only Christian ruler who truly understood and sympathized with the Muslim world. He had spent many years building a relationship with Abdul Hamid and the Ottoman Empire. There was much German investment in Ottoman lands, and Germany was holding a recently inked agreement to build a rail line from Berlin to Baghdad. On the other other hand, Abdul Hamid had been deposed by Young Turks with democratic ideals the Kaiser found offensive, and he hoped to see the Young Turks taken down a few pegs and absolute rule restored in the Ottoman Empire. Then, too, the Bulgarian tsar, Ferdinand, was actually a German noble, and the Kaiser's second cousin. And Crown Prince Constantine of Greece was married to the Kaiser's sister. He even began to restrain himself from referring to King Nicola of Montenegro as "the sheep stealer of the Black Mountains," as had previously been his wont.

Now the Kaiser tended to go back and forth when discussing the complex situation in the Balkans. He told the Austrians that Germany would back them, should they get into a war with Russia, but he told his own ministers that Serbia's desire for a port on the Adriatic was justified and the suggestion that Germany should go to war to prevent her from getting one was nonsense.

On December 8, 1912, the Kaiser called a meeting of his War Council, and this meeting is much discussed by modern historians, as it gives us some insight into the thinking of the German government in these crucial last days of peace. The meeting was called after a communication from the British government, warning Germany that in the event Austria attacked Serbia or Germany attacked France, Britain would intervene.

Helmuth von Moltke, the Army Chief of Staff, was gloomy over Russia's recently announced five-year program to expand its army. Russia's modernization, its increasing wealth, its expanding rail network, capable of delivering large forces to Germany's doorstep, and, of course, its alliance with France—in which it had stubbornly persisted for eighteen years now, in spite of Germany's best efforts to pry the two countries apart—all these things were an ongoing worry for German military planners. Von Moltke told the Kaiser that, in his opinion, by 1917, when the Russian program was complete, Russia would be capable of defeating Germany single-handed, and the general assumption among the War Council seemed to be that as soon as Russia could defeat Germany single-handed, it would proceed to do so. Therefore, von Moltke reasoned, since war with Russia was inevitable, it would be in Germany's interest to begin such a war as soon as possible, while the odds were still on her side. Like, how about right now?

But the Naval Secretary, von Tirpitz, objected that his navy was not yet ready for a war in which Britain would be one of the enemies. There were two problems. One was that the Imperial Navy had not yet completed its U-boat base at Heligoland. The other was the expansion of the Kiel Canal, Germany's strategically vital link between the Baltic Sea and the North Sea. The Kiel Canal was the German Navy's means of transferring ships between the two without having to risk the trip around Denmark, which would potentially expose them to enemy attack. The problem was that the new dreadnoughts Germany was adding to her fleet were too big for the existing canal. It needed to be widened. The widening of the canal would take longer than the U-boat base, von Tirpitz said, so a year and a half, maybe, before the Navy was ready. Typically, von Tirpitz also thought now would be a good time to introduce yet another naval bill into the Reichstag, to fund yet another expansion of his fleet.

It's worth noting that neither the German Chancellor, Bethman-Hollweg, or the foreign minister, von Kiderlen, were present at this meeting. I'm not sure how they reacted to the news of what went down in the Imperial War Council, but I'm sure that was an interesting conversation. Two days later, a similar meeting was held in Vienna, where the Austrian chief of staff Conrad, would, predictably, recommend war with Serbia. More surprisingly, this recommendation was seconded by the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the Empire. But the Kaiser, Franz Josef, quashed the idea. For now.

Happily, with the failure of the Bulgarian offensive aimed at Constantinople, the belligerents in the Balkan War agreed to an armistice on December 3, and the British Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey, proposed a great power conference in London to sort out the situation. Bethman-Hollweg and Kiderlen jumped at the invitation. They were trying to improve relations between Germany and Britain. While no one believed anymore that a German-British alliance was possible, Bethman-Hollweg and Kiderlen held out hope that if the British government could be persuaded of Germany's honorable intentions, perhaps they could win at least British neutrality in the war that so many thought was coming.

The events of late 1912 have been described as a dress rehearsal for the coming July Crisis. The parallels are eerie, with things moving even so far as an Austrian mobilization. This time, the Russian government would respond calmly, and would be castigated for its timidity in the Duma. This time, the German government would shy away from precipitating a general war for the sake of supporting Austria. Von Tirpitz's argument that he needed another eighteen months before the Navy would be ready strikes many as particularly meaningful. If you do the math, he's saying he'll be ready in June of 1914. Quite a coincidence, if coincidence you call it. Some would go so far as to say that the timetable for the Great War was set at that German War Council meeting of December 1912. Others shy away from so bold a claim, but I would go so far as to say this: Here is where you see some of the most important figures of the German government discussing the Great War not as an "if," but as a "when." I wouldn't go so far as to say they decided for war, but they decided something almost as profound: that war was inevitable, and it was now a question not of avoiding it, but of managing it.

We'll have to stop there for today. Thanks for listening. We have a winner in our *Box of Sand* giveaway, so congratulations to Benjamin and thanks to everyone who participated. If you like *The History of the Twentieth Century*, why not give us a rating and a review on iTunes, and on the other fine sites where podcasts are available. Ratings and reviews help other podcast listeners find the show, listeners who hopefully will enjoy it as much as you do. And I hope you'll join me next week on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we continue the story of affairs in the Balkans in 1913. Yet another coup in Constantinople, Europe moves further down the path toward war, and Austria is a helpless spectator as the map of her front doorstep is being redrawn. The *schlemiel* of Europe. That's next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. As war tensions rose in Europe, Sir Edward Grey continued to insist to the British Cabinet and Parliament that Britain had made no binding commitment to come to the aid of France in the event of war. And yet, British Army commanders were working in close cooperation with their French counterparts to draw up plans for the deployment of the British Army into France, in the event of a German invasion, and the French were privately reassuring the Russians that Britain could be counted upon if the worst came to pass.

In July 1912, Britain and France would also come to a naval agreement, under which France would move its naval assets into the Mediterranean, which was an area of special concern for

France, since, in the event of a war, France would want to recall its colonial forces in North Africa to Metropolitan France. Britain, in return, would move substantial naval forces out of the Mediterranean and to the Home Fleet, where they would be responsible for guarding the French Atlantic coast and be available for use against Germany.

Many conservative elements in British government opposed this idea. A strong British naval presence in the Mediterranean had been considered a bedrock element of British naval deployment since the days of the French Revolution. But First Lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill, a supporter of the agreement, won the day by pointing out that in the event of war with Germany, the North Sea would be the decisive naval theatre, and it was therefore vital that Britain have supremacy there.

This agreement would be one more step along the path to war.

[music: Closing Theme]