

# The History of the Twentieth Century

## Episode 75

### “The Great Illusion”

#### Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

“[W]ealth in the economically civilized world is founded upon credit and commercial contract... so that if conquest is not to be self-injurious, it must respect the enemy’s property, in which case it becomes economically futile... For a modern nation to add to its territory no more adds to the wealth of the people of such nation than it would add to the wealth of Londoners if the City of London were to annex the county of Hertford.”

Norman Angell. *The Great Illusion*.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 75. The Great Illusion.

Norman Angell was an English journalist. Later in his life he would become a Labour Member of Parliament and be awarded a knighthood and a Nobel Peace Prize. But before all that, in 1909, he published a small book entitled *Europe’s Optical Illusion*. It would be revised and expanded in 1911 into a work called *The Great Illusion*.

The “great illusion” alluded to in the title is that war could be profitable. Angell argued that in the past, when wealth was largely agricultural and was derived from land, a nation could become richer by taking more territory. But in the modern world, this thinking had become obsolete. Wealth no longer came from land. It came from the industry of workers, and was developed by trade and credit. War was inimical to both, and it therefore followed that even a nation which won a war would find itself made poorer, not richer, in the effort.

It was a new argument in support of a familiar conclusion: that war had become obsolete. It is related to Jan Bloch’s argument that a general war in Europe would lead to economic collapse and revolution, but Angell adds to this the claim that a strong and wealthy nation has more to gain through peaceful cooperation than through aggression and conquest. In this way, *The Great Illusion* was a poke in the eye to the prevailing opinion of the day, the view that conquest and

expansion were evidence of a strong and vital nation. The view that international relations is a zero-sum game, in which one must either conquer or be conquered.

Of course, aggression and conquest is about to break out in Europe nonetheless, but that does not undermine Angell's argument. He didn't say war was impossible; he said it was a poor choice, because peace was more profitable. It is hard to argue with that conclusion, even in hindsight.

We talked about Jan Bloch and the peace movement of the time in episodes 29 and 30. We also talked about socialism in episode 18, and saw that the socialist movement of the day was mostly pacifist. In Angell's native Britain, labor and socialist leaders like Keir Hardie were antiwar. There was also a strong pacifist movement within the churches of the United Kingdom, and we should take special note here of the role of the Society of Friends, or Quakers, a religious sect small in numbers but much larger in influence.

In Britain, as well as in the United States, there was much support for the use of arbitration to resolve international disputes. This reflects the fact that both of these nations have successfully used negotiation and arbitration to avoid armed conflict, particularly with each other. We talked about arbitration as a means of settling quarrels between nations. You'll recall the creation of the Permanent Court of Arbitration in 1899. Andrew Carnegie donated the funds to build the Peace Palace in The Hague as a home for the court, and it was opened, with much fanfare, in 1913.

The Liberal Party was in power in Britain at the time, and it was philosophically antiwar. The British government were largely preoccupied with domestic political matters—see episodes 38, 46, 56, and 73—and since the Foreign Secretary had the trust of the Prime Minister and the Cabinet, he effectively had free rein in foreign affairs.

The British Foreign Secretary during this period was Sir Edward Grey. He was a country gentleman and a relation of the Earl Grey who first got the idea of putting oil of bergamot into tea. We've already noted the irony that this man, who spoke no foreign languages, never traveled abroad, and was known primarily for his frequent getaway vacations into the country, where he loved to hunt and fish and ramble, would become Britain's Foreign Secretary. One frustrated British diplomat was quoted as saying he wished Grey would spend less time with his ducks and more time learning to speak French.

The other irony about Grey was that he was the most powerful single foreign policy figure in Europe at the time, even though Britain is democratic and, theoretically, has a Cabinet government that takes decisions collectively. There are several reasons for this. One was Grey's long tenure—remember that he was and is the longest-serving foreign secretary in British history. A telling statistic is that France went through fifteen foreign ministers during Grey's tenure at the British Foreign Office.

Another is the confidence the Cabinet had in him and their willingness to delegate foreign policy to him while the Cabinet focused on domestic matters. Another was that Grey was always leery

of Germany. By 1912, it seemed to many in both countries that British relations with Germany were warming again after more than a decade of chill. But Grey never warmed to Germany. Neither did the career Foreign Office officials who worked with him and saw eye to eye with him on this question. Grey also had a lot of support for his hard line among members of the opposition Conservative Party in Parliament, who also continued to regard Germany with suspicion.

The result was that Grey had a remarkable degree of discretion in formulating British foreign policy, and we've seen the result in the emergence of ententes with France and Russia. But Grey was not frank with his Cabinet colleagues, and this has led to ambiguities in Britain's relationship with France. Grey was privately signaling to the French a degree of support he was not willing to admit publicly, or even in Cabinet. The result, as we will see, will be that the French will feel confident of British support as the July Crisis unfolds, while the Germans will think it realistic to hope that Britain remains neutral. These conflicting reads on British policy will increase the odds of war, while also creating many tense moments in early August 1914.

[music: "God Save the King"]

A remarkable fact about the United States government at this time is that two of the most devoutly religious figures in American political history—Woodrow Wilson and William Jennings Bryan—are just now serving as America's President and Secretary of State, respectively. In the United States, as in Britain, many of the staunchest peace advocates come out of churches, and again, we must take special note of the outsized influence of the numerically small Quakers.

Both Wilson and Bryan had pacifist leanings, and both accepted America's self-image as a purer, more peaceful and more spiritual land than the Europe from which many Americans' ancestors departed. In the early days of the Great War there was no enthusiasm in the United States for getting involved, and Wilson would proclaim a policy of strict neutrality. But "neutrality" for Wilson did not mean the traditional American position of remaining aloof from European affairs. Wilson and Bryan believed the United States could play a constructive role in ending the war and restoring peace in Europe, but that it could be more effective as a neutral mediator that maintained cordial relations with both sides rather than by attempting to tip the scales by entering the war itself.

[music: "Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean"]

In France, the President of the Republic in 1914 was Raymond Poincaré. Poincaré had previously been Prime Minister. He first became Prime Minister in 1912, succeeding Joseph Caillaux. You may recall that Caillaux was Prime Minister during that second Moroccan crisis, and was forced to resign shortly afterward, when his secret back door negotiations with the Germans became public.

Poincaré was a more conservative politician, known for his support of a harder line against Germany. The moment when Poincaré became Prime Minister was something of a low point in Franco-Russian relations. The French had not supported the Russian position during the 1908 Bosnian annexation crisis, and the miffed Russian government wouldn't support France during the 1911 Moroccan crisis. Poincaré set to work at once to rebuild France's fraying relationship with Russia, seeing it as a vital component of his get-tough-with-Germany policy.

It was during Poincaré's premiership that the Balkan Wars broke out. As part of his strategy of improving relations with Russia, Poincaré broke with previous French governments by getting France more involved in the Balkans, particularly by taking a staunchly pro-Russian position on Balkan questions. This was apparently out of a desire to avoid a replay of the hard feelings that had resulted after the Bosnia crisis. France backed Russia and backed Serbia, even to the point of lending Serbia money for arms purchases and making her the strongest of the Balkan nations. Poincaré would follow this policy of backing Russia and backing Serbia all the way through to the July Crisis.

Just 13 months after becoming Prime Minister, Poincaré got himself elected President of the Republic, defeating his lifetime political rival, friend of the podcast Georges Clemenceau. He would thus become the first French Prime Minister to move directly from that office to the presidency. In the Third Republic, the presidency was largely ceremonial, but the politically savvy Poincaré was adept at using the office to exercise influence. Mostly over foreign policy, and he wanted a foreign policy that took a hard line toward Germany.

It was in 1913, during the Poincaré presidency, that France enacted the so-called Three-Year Law. This was meant to address the disparity in the sizes of the French and German armies that was a consequence of the disparity in population between France and Germany that I talked about all the way back in episode six. Germany has a 50% larger population than France, with a correspondingly larger army. But by increasing the service requirement of French conscripts from two years to three years, this law puts the French Army on track to parity with the German Army, at least as measured by active duty soldiers. (Germany will still have the edge in reservists.) And when you add in the Russian Army, Germany is now looking not only at a two-front war, but a two-front war in which she is seriously outnumbered. After the Three-Year Law takes full effect in 1917, that is.

This will have the unintended, but entirely predictable, effect of convincing the German government that it would be better to fight a war now than to wait until 1917, when the odds are even longer against her.

Another example of the new hard line against Germany was the appointment of Marshal Joseph Joffre as the commander in chief of the French Army. Joffre reoriented French military planning for a possible war with Germany away from a purely defensive stance toward a the-best-defense-is-a-good-offense strategy, in which the response to a German attack would be a massive French

counterattack aimed at taking back Alsace and Lorraine. Joffre had little use for the civilian government. Civilians had little input into his planning, and he wasn't big on sharing his plans with the civilians in the government.

In 1914, though, Poincaré's right-leaning policies were engendering a backlash. In the legislative elections held in the spring of that year, Joseph Caillaux's Radical Party—actually a center-left party—took 195 seats in the Chamber of Deputies. When you add in the French socialist party, under the leadership of Jean Jaurès, which is anti-war in general, you have a small majority for the left, a left that opposes the Three-Year Law and is losing patience with Poincaré's more muscular foreign policy.

But Poincaré was undeterred. The President is planning a state visit to Russia to meet with the Emperor and reaffirm the Franco-Russian alliance. And to make sure the message is heard, he's traveling to St. Petersburg in style aboard *France*, France's latest dreadnought battleship.

[music: "La Marseillaise"]

Which brings us to Russia. You may have noticed that we haven't heard much out of the Russian Emperor Nikolai II for a while now. Defeat in the Russo-Japanese War, along with the Revolution of 1905 that accompanied it, have clipped the Emperor's wings. Russia now has an elected parliament, the Duma, and most observers at the time concluded that she was transitioning into a constitutional monarchy.

But the Emperor has been sabotaging the Duma. He dismissed the first Duma of 1906 in just ten weeks. The second Duma, in 1907, lasted only a little longer. The third Duma lasted much longer—its full five-year term, in fact—but that's because it was much more conservative. By this time, large parts of the Empire are under martial law, freedom of speech was becoming curtailed, and socialists were shut out of the political process. Consequently, this Duma was much friendlier to the Emperor, and came to be called "The Master's Duma."

But the Revolution of 1905 moderated the Emperor's authority in another way, by bringing his ministers together into a Council of Ministers who could consult with one another. Before this time, the Emperor's ministers met with him one on one, and that was that. The result was that the Emperor generally favored the policies of whichever minister he had spoken to most recently, a problem we have also seen in Germany and Austria. But this reform brought the Emperor's ministers together into something like a cabinet, and the chair of the council became something like a prime minister.

From 1906 to 1911, the Chair of the Council of Ministers was Pyotr Arkadyevich Stolypin. He was a monarchist, but also ran the council with a firm hand. But he gradually fell out of the Emperor's favor, and was spared the humiliation of being fired only because he was assassinated first.

Stolypin was shot at the Kiev Opera House during intermission of a performance of the Rimsky-Korsakov opera *The Tale of Tsar Saltan*, and died a few days later. His killer was 24-year old Dmitry Grigoriyevich Bogrov, a Jewish Ukrainian anarchist revolutionary who was also an informant for the secret police. Welcome to late Imperial Russia. Bogrov was himself executed for the crime just days after Stolypin's death, despite a plea for clemency from Mrs. Stolypin.

What was Bogrov's motive? The obvious answer is that he was a leftist revolutionary. But Emperor Nikolai and his two oldest daughters were also in attendance at the opera that night, which raises the question of why Bogrov went for Stolypin when he might have had an equally good opportunity to kill the Emperor. This, plus Bogrov's known relationship to the secret police has caused some to speculate that he was actually working on behalf of right-wing interests who wanted to roll back Russia's modest democratic reforms and saw the elimination of Stolypin as a necessary first step. It is a question debated to this day.

But whether it was by accident or by design, the murder of Stolypin marks the beginning of the Emperor reasserting his Imperial prerogatives. Another reason the Emperor stepped back from full rule of his Empire during the Stolypin period is the poor health of his heir, the crown prince Alexei. You'll recall that Alexei has hemophilia, a genetic disorder that impedes the ability of the blood to clot. He inherited the gene from his great-grandmother, Queen Victoria. Medical science of the day had no effective treatment for hemophilia. People with hemophilia are prone to episodes of bleeding, both externally and internally. The internal bleeding can lead to prolonged periods of swelling, especially in the joints, accompanied by terrible pain.

You can only feel sympathy for any small child forced to endure bouts of excruciating pain lasting days or weeks and for which there is no treatment. There was the new pain relieving drug, aspirin, and the doctors prescribed it, but aspirin, as you probably know although the doctors of the time did not, also has the side effect of inhibiting clotting, and therefore aggravating the underlying cause of the boy's pain.

It's an awful situation. And you also can feel sympathy for any parent forced to watch helplessly as their beloved child lies in his bed, writhing in agony. You can understand if parents in that position are open to anything or anyone that offers even a tiny hope of relieving the endless cycles of torment.

And that brings us to Grigori Yefimovich Rasputin. You likely recognize the name. He is a compelling and mysterious figure in this period of Russian history. The mystery derives from the fact that little is known about him, and what is known has been filtered through rumor, legend, and romanticism. He was known as The Mad Monk or sometimes Father Grigori, although he held no official religious office within the Russian Orthodox Church. He was born to a peasant family in Siberia in 1869. Little is known of his life before his early thirties, when he became a prominent religious figure, but we do know that he had little or no formal education and could barely read. He married a girl named Praskovya shortly after his eighteenth birthday. They lived

with Rasputin's parents, and would have seven children altogether, three of whom would survive to adulthood. Rasputin would leave his pregnant wife and children behind when he began his career as a religious pilgrim and mystic ten years later, although Praskovya would always remain faithful to him.

All sorts of motives are offered for Rasputin's sudden religious awakening at the age of 28, everything from a vision of the Virgin Mary to a desire to get out of his home town ahead of charges of horse thievery. Whatever the reason, he became a religious pilgrim who visited monasteries and other holy places throughout Siberia and possibly beyond. It's hard to say. Over time, he attracted followers. His reputation grew, and something of a cult developed around him. He was a controversial figure from the beginning. Dark rumors of flagellation and group sex among Rasputin and his followers would dog him throughout his career, but there were also those who would vouch for him as a genuine figure of religious inspiration, including clergy and bishops in the Russian Orthodox Church.

This kind of holy man—if you take Rasputin as a holy man—a wandering ascetic mystic through whom God works wonders, is a distinctively Russian Orthodox sort of figure. There's even a word for them in Russian: *starets*. Emperor Nikolai had shown an interest in *startsy* even before the birth of the crown prince or his first meeting with Rasputin. In 1903, he had taken the unusual step of getting personally involved in the church process to advocate for the canonization of a *starets*. And the Empress had developed an interest in Russian Orthodox mysticism, which is kind of strange when you consider that she was raised Lutheran, but, you know, the converts are always the worst.

By the time the infant crown prince had been diagnosed, Rasputin had already developed a reputation as a man of God with powers of spiritual healing. He came to the notice of the Empress, who contacted him and asked for his help on behalf of the crown prince.

What exactly happened next is lost in the mists of rumor and legend. What we can say for certain is that the Empress became firmly convinced—and the Emperor became kinda, sorta convinced—that Rasputin and Rasputin alone had the power to bring relief to their young son.

Why would the Empress believe that? It might have been coincidence. It might have been simply that the boy got better when Rasputin was around, and had episodes of pain after he left, and the Empress put two and two together and thought she saw a connection. Maybe he spoke comforting words and the placebo effect did the rest. Maybe he shared some simple homespun peasant wisdom that helped the boy get through the pain. Maybe he really was a man of God; I'm not in any position to dispute it. Or maybe Rasputin was just what his enemies always claimed he was: an evil, cruel, manipulative man who saw an opportunity to advance himself by worming his way into the confidence of the Imperial family.

But speaking on a personal note, as a father who has raised two disabled children of his own, I have no trouble believing that Alexei's parents were driven to such desperation that they would

grasp at any straw, so matter how slender, if there was any chance it would help their child. I find it poignant to think about Nikolai and Alexandra, who were two of the wealthiest and most powerful human beings in the history of the world, and yet in this regard they were simply two frightened, lonely, helpless, desperate parents with nowhere else to turn.

Bear in mind that Alexei's illness was a state secret. He was the heir, and it would be damaging to the already troubled Romanov dynasty if it became public knowledge that the Emperor's only son had a genetic disorder that left it questionable whether he would live long enough to inherit the throne and sire an heir of his own. So the rest of Russia didn't see what you and I see: desperate parents trying to help a suffering child. The rest of Russia saw a mysterious and controversial Siberian peasant suddenly drawn into the Imperial family and becoming an intimate of the Empress herself, at a time when the Emperor and his wife are also becoming increasingly isolated from the nation they supposedly rule. It was peculiar. It was all but inexplicable, and so rumors sprang up by the bushel to explain it. Rasputin had hypnotized the Empress. They were sleeping together, and cuckolding the naïve Emperor. It was black magic.

For those who supported the monarchy in the abstract, but disagreed with Nikolai's policies, Rasputin was a convenient scapegoat whenever the Emperor made a bad decision. He had fallen under the influence of the Mad Monk. For those who wanted to overthrow the Romanovs, Rasputin was a useful symbol of the corruption and degradation at the heart of the Russian state.

But after Stolypin, the Emperor began to assert his authority once again. None of Stolypin's successors will have the discretion he had wielded. Nikolai was back. It might be easier to cheer on this new Imperial assertiveness, if Nikolai had been asserting himself for the sake of some set of policies meant for the good of the Empire. But his only real conviction was that no one but he should have much political power. So the Emperor used his clout not to further his own goals, but to make sure that no one else in Russian government had enough clout to further *their* goals. This is not a formula for progress.

The crown prince Alexei was now nine years old, and doing quite well, considering his disability. Two Imperial Navy sailors were appointed his nannies, to follow him about and make sure he didn't hurt himself, a challenging assignment when you're dealing with a nine-year old boy. Nikolai took the first steps toward preparing his son to succeed him: Alexei would sometimes sit in on official meetings and appear at public events. But he still had crippling bouts of pain, and was sometimes seen in public being carried by one of his sailor nannies. The exact nature of his illness remained a secret, but it became increasingly obvious that *something* was wrong.

The year 1913 marked the tercentenary of the Romanov dynasty, and the Imperial family celebrated with elaborate pageantry, including a tour of the Empire. Nikolai and Alexandra were greeted by cheering crowds wherever they went, which made it possible for them to ignore

Russia's ongoing political violence and repression and pretend just for a little while longer that they were popular.

[music: "God Bless Our Noble Czar"]

"I am the sole master of German policy, and my country must follow me wherever I go." One of the many pompous claims of the German Kaiser Wilhelm II.

And here we are at last. You knew this moment was coming. I have been on Kaiser Wilhelm's case for 75 episodes now.

You can guess that Europe was tired of it. Wilhelm has been Kaiser for 26 years, and more than any other European monarch of the period, he has been using his Imperial position to meddle in international affairs. I use the word "meddle," because Wilhelm did not consult with his own Foreign Office. When he got an idea in his head, he acted on it, and recognized no one else's right to be included, consulted, or sometimes even informed.

He was quixotic, mercurial, temperamental, erratic, flighty, unstable, fickle. He kept coming up with outlandish new ideas, and pushing them aggressively. An alliance with Britain against Russia. A German colony in Brazil. An alliance with Russia against France. A German colony in China. An alliance with the Islamic world to launch *jihad* against the British Empire. A German colony in Mesopotamia. An alliance with Japan against the United States.

(Did you know that the German General Staff had plans drawn up for a potential war against the United States? Apparently, these plans involved invading and occupying Puerto Rico as a forward base, and then amphibious invasions of New York and Boston. The German Army would next pacify New England, and then march south and west. And if this sounds vague and unworkable, well, I suspect this plan only existed because the Kaiser commanded it be drawn up.)

One of the Kaiser's responsibilities was to meet regularly with the other monarchs of Europe, many of whom were his relations. By 1914, he was something like the patriarch of the European royal households. Another Kaiser might have tried to use these meetings to foster a sense of kinship and camaraderie among his fellow monarchs. Wilhelm used them to bully and cajole other monarchs into agreeing to whatever was his big idea of the moment. We've already seen how hard he badgered the Russian Emperor Nikolai II in an effort to pry the Russians away from their alliance with France, to the point where Nikolai dreaded being cornered by Wilhelm at a party. A lot of other royals felt the same way.

In 1904, Wilhelm had dinner with King Leopold II of Belgium, and used the occasion to let out a state secret, warning Leopold that in the event of a war between Germany and France, the German Army intended to march through Belgium, and that if Leopold were wise, he would cooperate. Then, after the war, the Kingdom of Burgundy would be reborn, and Leopold would

be its sovereign. Leopold replied that Belgium was a constitutional monarchy, and the Belgian parliament would have to have its say. Wilhelm retorted that he couldn't respect any monarch who deferred to elected politicians.

And so, for flummoxing foreign services across the world, for intimidating and bewildering the crowned heads of Europe, I would like to award this week's Kaiser Wilhelm II Award for Making an Ass out of Yourself to Kaiser Wilhelm II.

[sound effect: cheers]

Anyway, after 26 years of this, most everyone in Europe was getting pretty tired of Wilhelm. Including his subjects. By 1914, the political climate in Germany was already changing. Wilhelm's ministers were asserting themselves, and experience had taught them that the best way to get something done was to keep the Kaiser out of the loop.

The funny thing is, for all the aggressive talk, Wilhelm has a history of backing down when a confrontation grows serious. Remember the two Moroccan crises, for instance. Jules Cambon, the French ambassador in Berlin, once said "It is a curious thing, to see how this man, so sudden, so reckless and impulsive in words, is full of caution and patience in action."

And that's why, as Austria was engineering the July Crisis, in cooperation with German officials, they made sure the Kaiser was on his annual Norwegian cruise and far away from Berlin. It wasn't Wilhelm who was getting war fever in the summer of 1914; it was his ministers.

In 1911, the same year that Norman Angell's *The Great Illusion* was published in Britain, a German general of the old-school Prussian variety named Friedrich Adolf Julius von Bernhardi published *Deutschland und der Nächste Krieg*, or *Germany and the Next War*. In it, he made the full Social Darwinist argument, unapologetically. War was an unavoidable reality. Conquest was a biological necessity. It was conquer or be conquered. And the Germans were the greatest race in the world. Therefore, it was not merely inevitable that one day Germans would rule the world, it was desirable. It should be welcomed. It would represent the triumph of the highest ideals of the human race.

*Germany and the Next War* sold almost as well in Britain as it did in Germany, and seemed to confirm every British Germanophobe's worst nightmares. The Liberal politician and military expert Lord Esher said this about the book: "It is hardly conceivable that after 2,000 years of Christian teaching, and in the midst of a people from whom have sprung some of the loftiest thinkers and some of the greatest scientific benefactors of the human race, such opinions could find expression. They emanate, too, from a soldier hitherto held in the highest respect by all who have studied war as an odious possibility, not as an end desirable in itself. No one could have supposed that such ideas so crude and juvenile could have survived the awakening process of recent times."

Kaiser Wilhelm is often blamed for the Great War, but in truth, the willingness, even eagerness, to get a war going before it was too late came from the ministers under him. Bernhardt's book was one man's private opinion, not a statement of Imperial German policy, but it speaks to a darkness that had developed in the German soul. A boastful pride that claims Germany is better than other countries combined with a fearful paranoia that a world full of jealousy and hatred conspires to bring Germany to her knees. This darkness of the soul will contribute to the outbreak of the Great War, and, sadly, the war will not purge it. Indeed, the war will make the German soul darker still.

We'll have to stop there for today. Thanks for listening, and if you're enjoying *The History of the Twentieth Century*, why not like us on Facebook? Follow us on Twitter. Give us a rating and review at iTunes or Stitcher or wherever you're listening from. Drop by the website, [historyofthetwentiethcentury.com](http://historyofthetwentiethcentury.com), and leave a comment. And while you're there, I invite you to click the "donate" button if you have a few bucks to spare, and help keep the podcast going. And thank you to Robert and Jeff and Joe for donating already. And some of you have asked about a Patreon page; still working on it, but that'll be coming soon.

Two weeks from now is the Memorial Day holiday weekend in the United States, so I'll be taking that week off. Next week, I'll be attending the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America Nebula Conference in Pittsburgh. If you happen to be there, look me up. And if not, there will be a new episode released next week, assuming I can set everything up properly. So I hope you'll join me next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we return to Vienna and examine the deliberations of the Austrian government, as it ponders its response to the assassination of its crown prince. Today is better than tomorrow, next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. In the spring of 1914, one of President Wilson's closest advisors, Colonel Edward House, traveled to Europe as part of a personal project, conceived by House but with Wilson's blessing, of sounding out the British and German governments about a three-way alliance. This proposed British-German-American alliance would not be a military alliance, but rather a peacekeeping alliance. The idea was that these three great powers would pledge to work together to enforce world peace. Any other country that threatened to start a war would surely be forced to back down in the face of joint pressure from these three countries.

Now, Colonel House was not a military man. "Colonel" was an honorary rank bestowed by the militia of his native Texas. It was common in those days for prominent Americans to carry (and use) the honorary rank of colonel from some state militia or other. But the Germans, perhaps misunderstanding the meaning of his honorific, seated him with the military men at state banquets. Maybe that affected his perspective. Maybe he was affected by the habit of European monarchs of the time to wear military uniforms. Have you noticed that in the old pictures? It's not just Kaiser Wilhelm. You're far more likely to find any of them, even George V, in uniform than out of it. So perhaps Colonel House was suffering from overexposure to gold braid.

But for whatever reason, when he returned to Washington in May 1914, he described the state of Europe as “militarism run stark mad.”

[music: Closing Theme]

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