

World War I TheCorner

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Alliance System / System of alliances

The alliance system was started by Bismarck, the German Chancellor from 1871 to 1890. After the Franco-Prussian War, Bismarck held that Germany was a "satiated state" which should give up ideas of further conquest. Thus Bismarck organized a system of alliances designed to maintain Germany's hegemony on the European continent. France was determined to challenge the hegemony of Germany because France had been defeated by Germany in 1871 and had been forced to cede two provinces (Alsace-Lorraine) to Germany. Bismarck tried to befriend Austria, Russia, Italy and Britain in order to isolate France.

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Animation showing the formation of the two alliance camps (alliance.avi)

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► ***Dreikaiserbund 1872***

Also known as the League of the Three Emperors (1872)

Bismarck's aim for forming this League was to isolate France by making friends with Austria and Russia. The partners were Kaiser William I of Germany, Czar Alexander II of Russia and Emperor Francis Joseph of Austria. These three rulers agreed: (i) to maintain the existing territorial arrangements in Europe; (ii) to resist the spread of revolutionary (e.g. socialist) movements; and (iii) to consult one another if any international difficulties arose.

France was being diplomatically isolated. But the underlying weakness of this personal understanding between the three emperors was the rivalry between Austria and Russia over the Balkan Peninsula. Both sought to dominate the Balkans. It was difficult for Bismarck to keep them in the same camp.

► ***Dual Alliance 1879***

The Congress of Berlin 1878

Rivalry between Austria and Russia in the Balkans came to a head in 1877-78. In 1875, five Balkan states revolted against the Turkish rule. Russia supported the Balkan states and defeated Turkey. On March 8, 1878, Turkey was forced to sign the Treaty of San Stefano, in which an independent, Big Bulgaria was created. Seeing that this Bulgaria would be a Russian puppet, Austria intervened, backed up by Britain, the traditional rival of Russia in the eastern Mediterranean. Bismarck volunteered to act as an "honest broker" and called the Congress of Berlin to settle the Balkan problems. At this Congress, Germany sided with Austria and Britain. Russia had to give up the Treaty of San Stefano and sign the Treaty of Berlin. The Treaty split Bulgaria into three parts (Bulgarian Proper was to be independent, Eastern Rumelia and Macedonia were to be ruled under Turkish sovereignty.) and brought Bosnia and Herzegovina under Austrian military occupation (but not annexation). Russia felt diplomatically humiliated. The anger of Russia turned against Bismarck because he chaired the Congress.

Germany sided with Austria

Unable to maintain friendly relations with both Austria and Russia, Bismarck chose Austria to be

his ally because firstly, Germany preferred a weaker partner which could be more easily controlled; secondly, alliance with Austria would throw open the Danube valley to German trade; thirdly, Austria had racial ties with Germany; fourthly, such an alliance would enable Germany to exercise influence in the Balkans; and fifthly, alliance with Russia would antagonize Britain as Britain did not like her colonial rival to be supported by a strong power.

The terms of the Dual Alliance

On October 7, 1879 Bismarck made the Dual Alliance with Austria-Hungary. The terms were: (i) each would support the other militarily until the end of the war if attacked by Russia or by Russia and another power; and (ii) each agreed to remain neutral if her ally was attacked by a power other than Russia.

Consequence

The Dual Alliance gave Germany a firm military ally but committed her more to the support of Austrian interests in the Balkans. In the meantime, however, Bismarck still wanted to keep the friendship of Russia for fear that Russia would turn to the side of France, in which case Germany would face an enemy on both east and west. >> [Back to Top](#)

► *Second Dreikaiserbund 1881*

Also known as The Second Three Emperors' League (1881)

Bismarck still wanted to keep Russian friendship after the signing of Dual Alliance (1879) with Austria. The year 1881 was particularly favourable for the restoration of the League of the three conservative Emperors. In that year, Czar Alexander III ascended the Russian throne after the assassination of Alexander II. The fate of his father made Alexander III ready for a renewal of the Three Emperors' League of 1872 which promised to suppress the revolutionary movements.

The terms of the League were: (i) the Balkans was to be divided into two spheres of influence--the western Balkans (Bosnia and Herzegovina) belonged to Austria and the eastern Balkans (Bulgaria) belonged to Russia; (ii) the three Emperors agreed to consult one another if there was another Balkan crisis, and (iii) the three Emperors agreed to preserve benevolent neutrality if any one of them found himself at war with a fourth power. The League could not last long because Austria and Russia would soon rival over the Balkan Peninsula again. >> [Back to Top](#)

► *Triple Alliance 1882*

Franco-Italian rivalry in Tunis

Bismarck had tactfully encouraged France to expand overseas in the hope of diverting her attention away from Alsace-Lorraine. French annexation of Tunis in northern Africa in 1881 alienated Italy, which was ambitious to build up an Italian empire in Africa. Italy was thus driven into Bismarck's camp in anger.

The terms of the alliance

The terms were:

- (i) if Italy or Germany was attacked by France, each would aid the other;
- (ii) if Austria was attacked by Russia, Italy would remain neutral, although Austria would aid Italy if she was attacked by France;
- (iii) if one of the parties was attacked by two or more powers, the other signatories were to come to her aid; and
- (iv) at Italy's request, both Austria and Germany agreed that in no case would the Treaty operate against Britain.

Note: Italy and the Triple Alliance

The position of Italy in the Triple Alliance seemed to be rather dubious. It was because the reasons which had impelled Italy to join the Triple Alliance were no longer important. By

1900, the Italians had resigned themselves to the loss of Tunis. They wanted to conquer Tripoli with French support. Moreover, by 1900, Italy needed not fear any attempt by the French monarchist-clericals to intervene in her domestic politics on behalf of the Pope as the republicans had secured power in France. Thus, in 1900, a secret arrangement was concluded between France and Italy: France was given a free hand in Morocco, Italy in Tripoli. In 1902, another secret agreement was made between France and Italy: each promised to be neutral if either was provoked into declaring war on a third power. This ran contrary to the terms of the Triple Alliance, by which Italy promised to aid Germany in case of a Franco-German war. By 1909 Italy made her *Racconigi Agreement* with Russia. By this Italy would remain neutral in any Russian attempt to regain the control of the Straits and Constantinople in return for Russian diplomatic support for the Italian conquest of Tripoli. These Italian agreements made the Triple Alliance almost null and void.

Consequence: the emergence of the first alliance camp

By this time, a powerful bloc had been formed in central Europe. Germany was now guaranteed against Russia by Austria, and against France by Italy. Bismarck had successfully kept the friendship of both Russia, Austria and Italy and kept France completely isolated. He was indeed a skilful diplomat who was able to handle the European powers for Germany's advantage. Yet Italy's commitment to the Triple Alliance was doubtful because the arch-enemy of Italian unity had been Austria which still kept Italia Irredenta; on the other hand, France was the friend of Italian unity. Once Italy's anger over Tunis cooled off, she would prefer an alliance with France to that with Austria.

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► Reinsurance Treaty 1887

Austro-Russian rivalry over Bulgaria (see below) led to the collapse of the Second Three Emperors' League again. Bismarck secretly made a treaty with Russia without informing Austria. Russia and Germany would observe neutrality towards each other if either became involved in war with a third power, except if Germany attacked France or if Russia attacked Austria-Hungary. By making this treaty, Bismarck had been able to prevent his nightmare -- a two front war--from being realized.

Austro-Russian rivalry over Bulgaria

According to the terms of the Second Three Emperors' League, Bulgaria was recognized as a Russian sphere of influence. The Bulgarians were experiencing an awakening of national self consciousness and did not want to be dominated by the Russians. In 1885, in defiance of the Treaty of Berlin, the Bulgarians united Bulgaria with Eastern Rumelia. Russia objected to the emergence of a large anti-Russian state but Austria and Britain gave their recognition to the union of Bulgaria with Eastern Rumelia. Russia hated the Austrians for breaking the terms of the Second Three Emperors League and allowed the League to lapse in 1887.

Change of German Policy after 1890

Bismarck made no formal alliance with Britain but remained on friendly terms with her. He did his best to avoid colonial conflicts with Britain and always declared that "Britain was Germany's old and traditional ally" and "there were no differences between England and Germany."

Kaiser William II - His ambition

Bismarck was a skillful diplomat. For twenty years, he made Germany the centre of the diplomatic stage. France was kept isolated, but Austria, Russia, Italy and Britain were on friendly terms with Germany. Bismarck's alliances were non-aggressive and kept Europe at peace. Yet after 1890, Bismarck fell from power and the new Kaiser took matters into his own hands. Kaiser William II was ambitious, rash and aggressive by nature. Rejecting the idea that Germany was a "satiated state", he wanted to make Germany not only a European power but a world power. He advocated *Drang nach Osten* (the drive eastwards into the Balkans and Middle East), colonial expansion and naval expansion. He was also influenced by Pan-German feelings to support Austria's expansionist policy in the Balkans. To pursue his ambitions, he often adopted blackmailing, threats and other unpopular methods. From 1890 to 1907, he succeeded in alienating Britain, France and Russia, and thus helped to create a rival bloc of anti-German alliances. >> [Back to Top](#)

► ***Franco-Russian Alliance 1893***

Russo-German friendship ended

When William II came to hold absolute power in Germany, he thought that sooner or later Germany would clash with Russia; so he allowed the Reinsurance Treaty to lapse. He stressed Germany's political and military ties with Austria instead. Such a policy, together with the growing Pan-Germanism, aroused strong Russian suspicion. Russia naturally turned to the side of France, which was the irreconcilable enemy of Germany.

Russia turned to France

Although at first there seemed little possibility for Czarist Russia to ally with Republican France, two factors made such an alliance possible: firstly, both felt necessary to form a military pact to offset the military threat of Germany; and secondly, France had floated several huge loans to help Russia to industrialise.

Alliance formed

The terms of the alliance were as follows: (i) if France was attacked by Germany or Germany and her ally (Italy), Russia would aid France; in return, if Russia was attacked by Germany or Germany and her ally (Austria), France would aid Russia; (ii) if one or more members of the Triple Alliance mobilized -- they would mobilize to help one another automatically; and (iii) this agreement would continue as long as the Triple Alliance was in force.

Consequence

The Dual Alliance ended the isolation of France, created a rival alliance to the Triple Alliance, and, most serious of all, faced Germany with the threat of a two front war. But William II failed to sense the danger at the time. He was contented to have Austria as an ally and continued his drive for power and prestige. >> [Back to Top](#)

End of British Isolation

Frantic British Efforts to Win Allies (1893-1902)

After the formation of the Franco-Russian Alliance, Britain found herself diplomatically isolated. Throughout the 19th century, she had followed the policy of 'splendid isolation', i.e. to avoid involvement in European affairs. But by the late 19th century, she felt that this policy was no longer a practical policy, for she could no longer command respect in world politics. This was illustrated by the following three incidents:

(i) In 1895, the Continental Group forced Japan to hand back Liaotung Peninsula to China. Britain was excluded. (The Continental Group made up of France, Germany and Russia. Even though these three powers did not cooperate in Europe, they sometimes cooperated in the Far East.)

(ii) In 1896, Dr. Jameson, encouraged and supported by the British Prime Minister of the Cape Colony, organized a raid into the Dutch Republic of Transvaal in South Africa. (Britain had long desired to obtain more colonies in Africa. Jameson Raid was one example of the British colonizing efforts.) The raid failed and Dr. Jameson and his raiders were all captured by the Dutch (Boers). Public opinion in most of the European countries was strongly anti-British. Kaiser William II congratulated on the Dutch efforts by sending the famous 'Kruger Telegram' to President Kruger of Transvaal. The European reactions to the Jameson Raid suggested that Britain had no diplomatic support in Europe.

(iii) Between 1893 and 1898, in Armenia, the Turkish Sultan slaughtered 200,000 of his Christian subjects. Britain's suggestion of sending a navy to the Armenian shore to rescue the Christians went unheeded.

British-German alliance failed

Britain at first sought to make some sort of alliance with Germany, but she failed because:

(i) Germany wanted Britain to join the Triple Alliance, but Britain refused for fear that it would involve her in European conflicts of no direct concern to Britain,

- (ii) Germany's naval expansion after 1898 threatened Britain's naval supremacy, and
- (iii) Germany's colonial interests clashed with those of Britain in China and the Balkans.

Note: Germany wanted to divide China into spheres of influence but Britain wanted to keep an open door for trade for all nations in every part of China. In the Balkans, Germany wanted to bring Turkey under the economic and political control of Germany. But Britain tried to maintain the integrity of the Turkish Empire for fear that if Germany controlled Turkey, she would threaten the British naval and economic interests in the Mediterranean.

Anglo-Japanese Alliance 1902

Consequently Britain concluded an alliance with Japan in 1902. The Alliance was important in European diplomatic relations in two ways:

- (i) Britain had abandoned her policy of isolation, and
 - (ii) since Britain could make use of Japan to check Russian aggression in the Far East, her fear of Russian colonial expansion lessened and this helped to pave the way for their future cooperation.
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► Entente Cordiale 1904

Britain and France needed mutual support

After concluding the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, Britain was still looking for a European ally. She naturally turned to France, the irreconcilable enemy of Germany. France also wanted Britain as her ally. France did not want to support Russia in a war in the Far East because it would mean a war with both Britain and Japan (Britain's ally in the Anglo-Japanese alliance). Alliance with Britain might absolve France from supporting Russia. In Africa, France wanted to settle many of her colonial disputes with Britain peacefully and gained the help of the latter in acquiring Morocco. (Morocco was rich in mineral and agricultural wealth, so France wanted to take over it as her colony.)

Note: There were many conflicts between Britain and France in Africa. In 1898, the conflict at Fashoda in North Africa nearly brought them into a war. But France realized that her greatest foe was Germany. Thus she wanted to settle her conflicts with Britain and concentrate her efforts against Germany.

Edward VII favoured French co-operation

The last obstacle to the formation of the British and French Entente was removed in 1901. In that year Queen Victoria died and was succeeded by her son Edward VII. Kaiser William II was Victoria's grandson, his mother having been the Queen's daughter. Thus Queen Victoria preferred an alliance of Germany to that of France. But Edward VII did not share his mother's sentiment towards Germany. His gay, pleasure loving way of life attracted him to France rather than to Germany. In a visit to Paris in 1903 he made himself highly popular among the French people. To improve the relations between France and Britain, the French President Loubet and Foreign Minister, Delcasse paid an official visit to London by the end of 1903.

Terms of the Entente

Consequently Britain reached a series of agreements with France in 1904. These agreements settled their old colonial disputes in Siam, West Africa, Madagascar, the remote New Hebrides and fishing rights in Newfoundland. The most important agreement was the one by which France recognized Egypt and the Sudan as British sphere of influence and Britain recognised Morocco as French sphere of influence; in addition, both would support each other if their respective spheres of influence were challenged by a third power.

German reaction

The Entente Cordiale (friendly agreement) was not an alliance in name, but it rapidly became something like it in fact. Kaiser William II was furious at it, both because it seemed to shut Germany out of Morocco and because it indicated that British influence would be used in the

interests of France, rather than those of Germany. >> [Back to Top](#)

► **Anglo-Russian Entente 1907**

France had a military alliance with Russia and a friendly agreement with Britain. It now became her concern to draw her two partners together. She finally succeeded in inducing Britain to settle her disputes with Russia in 1907.

Anglo-Russian rivalry ended

Britain and Russia had been long-timed rivals in colonial and trade questions in the Middle and Far East. But several factors made possible their agreement. Firstly, both felt greatly threatened by Germany. The rapid buildup of the German navy challenged Britain's position as the greatest naval power in the world. The construction of the Berlin-Baghdad railway meant an extension of German influence into the Balkans and the Turkish Empire, an area which Russia considered as her sphere of influence. Secondly, both Britain and Russia resented the aggressive nature of William II's diplomacy, as shown in the First Moroccan Crisis 1905-06. Thirdly, Britain considered that now Germany was a more dangerous rival than Russia to her commercial interests in the Balkans and the eastern Mediterranean. Fourthly, the growth of the Balkan states greatly reduced the Russian threat in the Balkans. This lessened Britain's fear of Russia. Fifthly, in the Far East Britain did not worry about Russian ambition any more as Russia was defeated by Japan in 1905.

Terms of the Entente

Therefore, in 1907, Britain and Russia agreed to settle their colonial disputes in the following manner. Firstly, Persia was divided into three parts: the north kept by Russia as her sphere of influence, the south kept by Britain, and the central was to remain under Persian control as a buffer zone. Secondly, Russia renounced her interests in Afghanistan. Russia and Britain were to enjoy equal trading rights in the country. Britain gained control of the foreign policy in Afghanistan. (This agreement safeguarded the security of India, relieving one of the major concerns of Great Britain.) Thirdly, both Russia and Britain recognized China's suzerainty over Tibet. They treated Tibet as a neutral state between themselves.

Emergence of the second alliance camp

Thus England was bound to France and Russia by Entente and France and Russia were held together by a firm alliance. This group of three great powers was usually called the Triple Entente. The European powers had now aligned themselves into two rival camps--the Triple Entente versus the Triple Alliance. >> [Back to Top](#)

► **Alliance System as a cause of the War**

The alliance systems were a cause of the First World War.

Firstly, the alliances were made in secret and so produced much distrust and suspicion among the European powers. Their general suspicion prevented their diplomats to devise a suitable solution to many of the crises preceding the war.

Secondly, the alliances were always made on a war-footing and so heightened the war tension and led to an arms race among the European powers. For example, within four years after the formation of the Triple Entente in 1907, Germany built nine dreadnoughts (battleships) and consequently Britain built eighteen. Thus all the European powers were ready for war in 1914.

Thirdly, since the European powers had made alliances with one another, a small dispute concerning one power might lead to a war involving all powers.

Fourthly, the alliances were originally strictly defensive but by 1910, many alliances had changed their character. The Austro-German alliance of 1879 was so modified that it had become an aggressive alliance after the Bosnian crisis in 1909, the German government promised to give military aid to Austria-Hungary, if Austria invaded Serbia and Russia intervened on behalf of the latter. As alliances had become instruments of national aggression, the chances of war doubled.

Fifthly, after the formation of the Triple Entente, Germany began to feel the threat to her security. The German press loudly talked about "encirclement", i.e. being surrounded by enemies on all sides. This induced the aggressive William II to pursue a more vigorous foreign policy in an attempt to break the unity of the Entente powers. This resulted in a series of international crises

from 1905 to 1914. >> [Back to Top](#)

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