

# POTSDAM WAR COUNCIL 1912

**POTSDAM WAR COUNCIL 1912:** In the First Balkan War of 1912, the Balkan League formed by Serbia, Bulgaria, Montenegro and Greece under Russian patronage quickly defeated the forces of the Ottoman Empire. In Austria–Hungary, especially the Serbian strengthening was seen with increasing discontent and the German chancellor Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg urged Emperor Wilhelm II to declare his solidarity according to the Triple Alliance—which Wilhelm did, however overstating the case when on 22 November 1912 he openly proclaimed "*the German support under any circumstances*".

Trying to appease the growing sense of alienation, Bethmann-Hollweg had his Foreign Office state secretary Alfred von Kiderlen-Waechter publish a newspaper article in the *Norddeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* advising Austria–Hungary against a military action, which in turn caused annoyance in Vienna. The chancellor ultimately provoked a diplomatic crises, when in a Reichstag speech on 2 December he publicly confirmed the alliance with Austria–Hungary. Lord Chancellor Richard Haldane affirmed the concerns of the British government to the German ambassador Prince Karl Max von Lichnowsky and declared that the British would not remain passive in the case of an Austro–Hungarian attack on Serbia, nor would they tolerate any aggression of Germany against France on that occasion.

Kaiser Wilhelm II read Lichnowsky's report of his meeting with Haldane on the morning of Sunday, 8th Dec. The report left Wilhelm furious, lamenting that in the "*Germanic struggle for existence*" the British, blinded by envy and inferiority feelings, join the Slavs (Russia) and their Romanic accessories (France). He immediately summoned the "*War Council*" for 11 AM that same day.

The German Imperial War Council of 8 December 1912 was an informal conference of some of the highest military leaders of the German Empire. Meeting at the Stadtschloss in Berlin, they discussed and debated the tense military and diplomatic situation in Europe at the time. As a result of the Russian Great Military Program announced in November, Austria-Hungary's concerns about Serbian successes in the First Balkan War, and certain British communications, the possibility of war was a prime topic of the meeting. Wilhelm II called British balance of power principles "*idiocy*" but agreed that their statement was a "*desirable clarification*" of British policy. His opinion was that Austria-Hungary should attack Serbia that December, and if "**Russia supports the Serbs, which she evidently does...then war would be unavoidable for us, too,**" and that **this would be better now than later**, after completion of (the just begun) massive modernization and expansion of the Russian army and railway system toward Germany. Moltke agreed. In his professional military opinion "*a war is unavoidable and the sooner the better*". Moltke "*wanted to launch an immediate attack.*"

Both Wilhelm II and the Army leadership agreed that if a war were necessary it were best launched soon. **Admiral Tirpitz**, however, asked for a "*postponement of the great fight for one and a half years*" because the Navy was not ready for a general war that included Britain as an opponent. He insisted that the completion of the construction of the U-boat base at Heligoland and the widening of the Kiel Canal were the Navy's prerequisites for war. The British historian **John Röhl** has pointed out the coincidence that the date for completion of the widening of the Kiel Canal was the summer of 1914, but a reading of the report of the conference shows no agreement as to a war in 1914. Though Moltke objected to the postponement of the war as unacceptable, Wilhelm sided with Tirpitz. Moltke yielded "*only reluctantly.*"

Historians more sympathetic to the Entente, such as British historian John Röhl, frequently see this as a conference as setting a time when a war was to begin, namely the summer of 1914. It was clearly established that, if there was going to be a war, the German Army wanted it to commence before the new Russian armaments program began to bear fruit.

Historians more sympathetic to the government of Wilhelm II often reject the importance of this War Council as only showing the thinking, and recommendations of those present, with no decisions taken. They often cite the passage from Admiral Muller's diary (below), which states: "*That was the end of the conference. The result amounted to almost nothing.*"