

OLLI Lecture

November 3, 2009

I

I wish to conclude last week's lecture today by noting that it wasn't only the Europeans who engaged in aggressive imperialism in the latter part of the nineteenth century. The United States plunged into it as well when in April 1898 the Congress declared war on hapless Spain. I'll keep my remarks today very brief on this subject and am considering offering a course on the Spanish-American War and its consequences next year after we get back from our OLLI tour.

As you know, the battle cruiser *Maine* blew up in Havana harbor in the evening of February 15, 1898. 266 American sailors and officers were killed in that explosion. No matter how much the Spanish protested their innocence, we were not convinced and so war broke out between the two nations on April 23. Our attack was almost immediate—on Manila, halfway across the world. On May 1, an American squadron under Commodore George Dewey sank the Spanish Far Eastern fleet anchored at that harbor in a matter of hours. You may well ask, if the sinking of the *Maine* in Havana triggered the conflict, why did we go after the Philippines? When asked that question after the event, President McKinley said he had agonized and prayer over the subject and decided that the United States should take the lead in "Christianizing" the islands. McKinley was a Methodist; the Spaniards had been in the business of Christianizing the Philippines since the 16th century and had done a pretty good job of making converts. I'll have more to say about all this next spring, I hope.

II

The French have two delightful phrases to describe this period in their experience: *la belle epoch* (the beautiful time) and *la fin du siècle* (end of the century). There are many reasons that they should have been fond of the period at the close of the 19th century. Let me name a few:

- The completion of Baron Hausmann's magnificent urban planning projects; e. g., the city's theaters and opera houses where the works of such magnificent composers as Jacques Offenbach (1819-1880), Charles Saint-Saëns (1835-1921), Georges Bizet (1838-1875), and Claude Debussy (1862-1918) were performed. I should add that Paris welcomed the arrival of the 20th century by opening a Great Exhibition in 1900 and gained the reputation of "the city of lights" by the installation of almost three miles of electric street lamps. 50 million people traveled to see it.
- Another French revolution occurred in the visual arts when in 1872 Claude Monet (1840-1926) exhibited his "Impression, Sunrise." There was a howl of criticism from the established art world, but soon Monet was joined in this "impressionist" movement by such talents as: Eduoard Manet (1832-1883), Edgar Degas (1834-1917), Paul Cézanne (1839-1906), Pierre Renoir (1841-1919), and Mary Cassatt [an American] (1844-1926).

According to historian Gerhard Masur: *Renoir once compared the beginnings of impressionism with the advent of the French Revolution. Whereas, he said, individualism triumphed in politics in 1789, one hundred more years were required to conquer classicism...in the realm of the arts...The right to think freely and to speak freely led to the right to see freely and to express freely. Individualism is the foundation of all impressionist art...Hence, what counts is the sensation of the artist, his impression, and the manner in which he conveys this impression. The world is only a phenomenon, as [August] Comte would have said; my idea, as Schopenhauer phrased it. But, although the impressionists unconsciously shared the general viewpoint of their century's philosophers, their aim was different. They did not try to reach beyond the phenomenon; on the contrary, it was sensation that enchanted them and they tried to render it in paint. They did not look for laws; they tried to arrest fleeting perceptions...[R]eality was for them no longer the reality of fixed objects; it was the reality of the changing moment only.*

The great historian, Carlton J. H. Hayes, authored a volume about this period entitled, The Generation of Materialism, but what the Impressionists guessed and literature and science later confirmed is that (in the words of William

Shakespeare) “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophies” [Act I, Scene V in *Hamlet*.] William Langer, another noted historian, wrote in his introduction to Hayes’s volume: *To a generation that has experienced two great World Wars, the closing quarter of the nineteenth century is bound, in retrospect, to appear in the light of a golden age. It was an era of peace in Europe, an age of great technological advance, a period of progress, of growing tolerance, of spreading liberalism. Or so it seemed at least at the time and so it appears to many even now. And yet, when viewed historically...the late nineteenth century emerges rather as an age of materialism, of smug self-confidence, of uncritical assurance. It was...in many senses the seed-time of disaster, the prelude to an era of conflict and disillusionment.*

III

Let’s stay with the French for a moment. Looking beneath the surface we find that the “belle epoch” had a disturbingly ugly side. The nation had suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of the Germans in 1870-71 and its former emperor had been forced into exile, meaning that once again France found itself to be constituted as a republic (its third try with such a regime). The notion was not especially popular but the two existing royalist factions (Legitimists and Orleanists) couldn’t agree as to which one of their candidates should be crowned king. Thus, almost by accident France remained a republic, diplomatically isolated and deeply divided internally. Just what Bismarck had in mind. There were those who schemed to remedy the situation by direct action; foremost among them was General Georges Boulanger (1837-1891). Boulanger was a decorated war hero and served from 1886-87 as War Minister. He then plotted with Bonapartists and conservatives to overthrow the Republic and establish himself as dictator. Everything seemed set to go on the night of January 27, 1889, when Boulanger (instead of obeying a call to arms) fell into the arms of his mistress. The plot was exposed, the Republic saved, and the General fled into exile and two years later committed suicide.

Worse was yet to come. In 1894, Captain Alfred Dreyfus(1859-1935) was accused and found guilty of treason by a French military court. The accusation was a truly serious one (selling military secrets to the Germans) and Dreyfus, a Jew, was imprisoned at Devil's Island. The French Left suspected anti-semitism was at work here at the highest levels of the Army. It was novelist Emile Zola's (1840-1902) sensational 1898 piece, "J'Accuse" that appeared in the Paris daily *L'Aurore* that reopened the matter and ultimately won Dreyfus a pardon and in 1906 complete exoneration. The episode was to have far-reaching consequences, however. For example:

- The right-wing, anti-semitic "Anti-Dreyfusards" who rioted in the streets of Paris and elsewhere would produce some of the founders of French fascism (Maurice Barrès, author of Les Déracinés, and Charles Maurras, founder of *Action Française*).
- The Liberal and Socialist "Dreyfusards" won control of the French government in 1901 and promptly separated church and state in the nation; established a sweeping system of public schools; launched major reforms of the Army; and took many measures to strengthen French democracy. The Third Republic thus endured until it was conquered by Hitler in 1940.
- Also, many Jews pondered these events and one of them, Theodore Herzl (1860-1904) concluded that if Jews were persecuted even in France then only a national homeland of their own could protect them. Beginning in 1896 he began a movement to create such an entity. The movement is called "Zionism."

IV

On the other side of the Rhine, there are some interesting parallels to the French experience. For many Germans this, too, was a "belle epoch." While the Second Reich (1871-1918) could not rival France in great painters, it certainly produced some of Europe's finest musicians in Johannes Brahms (1833-1897), Richard Wagner (1813-1883), and Richard Strauss (1864-1949). In the sciences there was: Heinrich Hertz (1857-1894), the discover of radio waves; Wilhelm Rontgen (1845-

1923), the discover of X rays; Max Planck (1858-1947), the author of quantum theory; and, of course, Albert Einstein (1879-1955) who began publishing his theories of relativity as early as 1905. To this “Who’s Who” list I would have to add the name of Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886), the father of modern historical studies, and, of course, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900). There were many more, but you get the idea.

One thing about all these great thinkers was that the Germans put their research to work. It was in this period that the Germans developed the great research universities, funded by the state and private industry, to convert ideas into useable reality. It worked so well for them that we imported the notion when Johns Hopkins University opened in 1870. The results on the other side of the Atlantic were spectacular. As historian Koppel Pinson explained: *The most remarkable aspect of modern German history...is the economic transformation which occurred in Germany during the last half of the nineteenth century. In the course of about 30 years Germany experienced what England required over 100 years to complete—the change from a backward and predominantly agrarian nation to a modern highly efficient industrial and technological state. Only the economic development of Japan might be considered comparable.*

To cite a few statistics to demonstrate Professor Pinson’s observation:

- At the beginning of the 19th century Germany’s population was about 24 million. By 1914, it was nearly 68 million.
- In 1871, its urban population was about 36 percent of the total. By 1910, it was 60 percent.
- In the production of that key element of the iron and steel industry, pig iron, Germany turned out 2.7 metric tons in 1880; the US 3.8; and Great Britain, 7.8 metric tons. By 1910 Germany (14.7) had surpassed the British (10.1) and was second only to the United States (27.7 metric tons).

Still, the Social Democratic continued to grow in spite of Bismarck’s best efforts to inhibit it and the alliance system he created to keep the French isolated became ever more elaborate. In 1888, Bismarck’s collaborator in the creation of this

powerful state, Kaiser Wilhelm I, died at the age of 91. He was succeeded to the German throne by Frederick III, who was married to one of Queen Victoria's daughters. Frederick disliked Bismarck's authoritarian tendencies but could do little to correct them. He was suffering from throat cancer and died of the disease only 99 days after ascending the throne (1888). He was succeeded by his son, Wilhelm II, who was the last Hohenzollern to rule the German Empire. Although he had an early English education and corresponded often with his grandmother across the Channel, this Kaiser Wilhelm intended to set his own course. Born with a withered left arm, Wilhelm (like Teddy Roosevelt) was a great proponent of "manliness" and vigor. I should also add racism and imperialism.

The latter policy, German imperialism, would, Bismarck realized, bring the Empire into conflict with Great Britain, the world's foremost imperial power. Another point of disagreement was a pivotal item in the elaborate system of military treaties Bismarck had negotiated with various European powers. The objective of all of them was to keep France isolated on the Continent, devoid of partners who might co-operate in revising the results of Germany's 1871 victories. One key element in this network of treaties was the maintenance of good relations both with Austria-Hungary and the Russian Empire, policy that grew trickier as Hapsburg and Romanov interests collided in the Balkans. Still, Bismarck had managed to forge a permanent alliance with Austria and a temporary one with Russia; renewed every two years as the "Reinsurance Treaty." In one of his earliest acts, Kaiser Wilhelm refused Bismarck's request for its renewal.

On this and many other points, the young Kaiser and the old Chancellor disagreed. On March 17, 1890 Otto von Bismarck resigned. No other German Chancellor dared wield such power without the Kaiser's permission.

Thereafter came crucial changes:

- Germany entered the imperial race in China, Africa, and even the Middle East raising funds to construct a Berlin-to-Baghdad railway despite clear objections from the British.

- The Reich entered into a naval construction program just as a revolution was occurring in naval design that would produce massive battleships, driven by steam, and protected by steel. The British responded in 1906 by launching “the Dreadnaught,” an 18,000 ton vessels that was 527 feet long and packed ten 12” inch guns. She was driven by steam turbines and could sail at 21 knots. There was nothing like her afloat and thus began a hugely expensive naval arms race between Germany and Great Britain.

V

If the British were alarmed by this sudden and unwelcome intrusion on their command of the seas, the Russians were terrified by the emerging military strength of their German neighbors. By 1914, the German army was six times larger than the one that had humiliated France in 1870. Now, without the soothing assurances of the Reinsurance Treaty, it was the Russians who were isolated in Europe. French diplomats were quick to seize the opportunity and in 1894 concluded an alliance with Czarist regime that poured French capital into Russia, massively assisting its industrialization, and began bilateral military discussions. At ceremonies announcing the treaty, Czar Alexander III, the staunch autocrat, removed his hat for the playing of the “Marseillais,” the hymn of revolution. Bismarck’s nightmare, the encirclement of Germany by its rivals, had been realized. Europe now stood divided into two armed camps: Austria and Germany on one hand; France and Russia on the other. The former German Chancellor died before that division reached its final, bloody *denouement*. Czar Alexander died even sooner (1894), leaving the throne of “holy Mother Russia” to his son, Nicolas II and his wife Alexandra, the daughter of a German noble family and granddaughter of Queen Victoria.

Their tragic reign began with tragedy. Crop failures and massive wheat exports abroad (to raise capital for industrialization) had produced widespread famine in the Empire. In accordance with tradition and as a gesture of concern, the new Czar ordered a huge public banquet in Moscow to celebrate his coronation in that former capital. The result was pandemonium as thousands scrambled to get at

the free food and beer. Hundreds perished in the tumult; thousands were wounded. The regime was off to a sad start.

One of the triumphs of his father's reign had been railroad construction and Nicolas would continue to foster it. By the beginning of the 20th century, in fact, Russia was second only to the United States in total railroad mileage. The centerpiece of this effort was the great Trans-Siberian Railroad, a 5,500 mile undertaking, begun in 1891, that would link Moscow to the Pacific port of Vladivostok. That dramatic expansion of the Russian presence in the Far East involved the Empire into the politics of that region in a way hitherto unknown. The timing was unfortunate.

As you know it was at this time that the European powers were racing against each other to intrude upon Chinese sovereignty with their "treaty ports." A new power had entered the contest—Imperial Japan. In an astonishingly short time after 1854, feudal Japan had converted itself into a modern military power. In 1894 it used that power to make demands for Korea on their ancient rival, China, and when the Emperor rejected those demands, the Japanese declared war in 1895 and with their steel and steam battleships made short work of the Chinese navy. In the Treaty of Shimonoseki (1895) Japan gained sovereign control over Korea, Taiwan, and the entire Liaotung Peninsula including Port Arthur.

The Chinese appealed to the Russians for assistance and forced the Japanese to give back Liaotung. In gratitude the Chinese allowed the Russians to base a fleet at Port Arthur and its vicinity. There's much more to this story but I haven't time to give you the details. You won't be surprised to learn, however, that on April 13, 1904, [and after years of frustrated negotiations] the Japanese fleet delivered a surprise attack on the Russian navy at Port Arthur and sank it entirely.

The Czar and his advisors were outraged at this impudence and ordered the Baltic Fleet to sail around the world to punish the Japanese for their aggression. That fleet set sail in October of that year and with heroic measures reached the Tsushima Straits off the east coast of Korea by May 27, 1905. There they met the Japanese fleet under command of Admiral Togo, who promptly sank all but four small Russian ships. Mortal casualties on both sides were: 4,830 Russians; 110

Japanese. The land war had gone no better since the might of the Russian army could not be brought to bear on the Japanese over the single-track expanse of the Trans-Siberian. Every new trainload of Russian troops that reached Manchuria were defeated by a well-armed Japanese army. Anti-Czarist revolution broke out at home, spurred on by the events of “Bloody Sunday” [January, 1905] and the regime eagerly sought peace. President Theodore Roosevelt obliged and negotiated the Treaty of Portsmouth (September 1905) which brought the Russo-Japanese War to an end. Russia accepted Japan’s control of Korea, gave up its Liaotung claims, and returned the Sakalin Island to Japanese control. President Roosevelt garnered the Nobel Prize for his efforts.

At home, the revolution was so serious that Nicolas was obliged to accept the election of a parliament (Duma) for the first time in Russian history. The balloting took place in March and April 1906 (with most socialists boycotting) and the Duma convened in St. Petersburg on May 10 of that year. The dominant parties, mostly middle class, drew up a series of reforms that they demanded of the Czar. Their efforts were rewarded on July 22 when they arrived at their meeting hall in the Tauride Palace to find a notice that they had been dissolved and there would be new elections by command of the Czar. There would be three other elections and two other dissolutions but with each one the sentiment for regime change, even by violent means, increased. In September 1911, the Czar Prime Minister Peter Stolypin was shot dead while attending a theatrical performance in Kiev. He had been a reformer of sorts, establishing for the first time the right of Russian peasants to own their farms as individuals, not as part of a *mir*. He was the last of the Czar’s reformers and on this basis the Romanov dynasty attempted to defend itself against the growing power of its German neighbors.

VI

Finally for today there was the junior partner in Germany’s alliance system—the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Franz Josef, who had inherited his imperial crown during the revolutions of 1848, still presided over this sprawling empire in the heart of Europe as the 19th century ended. In fact, he would reign over it until his

death in 1916. The Empire had changed dramatically, however, during the course of that long time.

- In 1859 Austria had been driven from most of Italy.
- In 1866 the Empire had been excluded from German affairs.
- In 1867 Hungary gained autonomy in the Dual Monarchy.
- In January 1889, Franz Josef's son and heir, Crown Prince Rudolf, was found dead at a hunting lodge in Mayerling with his mistress, Mizzi Caspar. Suicide was rumored but never proven. The Emperor's nephew, Archduke Franz Ferdinand (1863-1914) thus became heir to the imperial title.
- In 1907 universal male suffrage was established in the Austrian portion of the Empire. The Hungarians, however, were still restricting male suffrage to one-quarter of their population on the eve of World War One.

The Austro-Hungarian Empire embraced virtually the whole Danube River Basin and in the latter part of the 19th century it grew impressively in terms of industrial capacity and population. Vienna, its capital, was the hub of the empire's railway system and also its cultural capital. Only Paris rivaled it in terms of productivity in the arts, featuring in music such names as Bruckner, Brahms, Mahler, and Dvorák. Of course, the music created by the Strauss family still enchants mass audiences (many thanks to public television in the US).

But there was the problem of the Slavs, especially the Czechs. They wanted not a Dual Monarchy but a federal monarchy that would embrace all of the ethnic minorities that made up the empire. Franz Josef opposed the idea and went to extent of annexing yet another Slavic/Muslim territory—**Bosnia and Herzegovina**—in 1908. The act outraged the Serbs and Serbian nationalists plotted to bring down Hapsburg control in the Balkans. That's why they disliked Franz Ferdinand so. He seemed willing to entertain the notion of a reformed and revitalized Empire by making it at least a Triple Crown. To demonstrate his good intentions toward the Empire's Slavic peoples, he made a good will trip to the Bosnian capital of Sarajevo in June 1914.