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PEACE, WAR AND THE
EUROPEAN POWERS,
1814–1914

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‘Civilization is only savagery silver-gilt.’

H. Rider Haggard, *Allan Quatermain*, (1887)

‘The past is a foreign country. They do things
differently there.’

L. P. Hartley, *The Go-Between*, (1953)

CONTENTS

<i>Preface</i>	ix
1 The ‘Congress System’	1
<i>To the Vienna Settlement</i>	1
<i>In Search of a New Equilibrium, 1814–15</i>	9
<i>The Congress System at Work</i>	15
2 Competition Short of War	24
<i>The Concert in Abeyance</i>	24
<i>Eastern Trio and Western Duo, 1830–8</i>	29
<i>The Near East Again, 1838–41</i>	37
<i>Absolutism in the East, Tensions in the West, 1842–7</i>	41
3 Revolutions and War, 1848–56	46
<i>Revolutionary Europe and the Balance of Power, 1848–52</i>	46
<i>Towards the Crimean War</i>	52
<i>War and Peace, 1854–6</i>	61
4 The Transformation of Europe, 1857–71	70
<i>Revisionism after the Congress of Paris</i>	70
<i>The Powers and Italian Unification</i>	74
<i>The Emergence of Bismarck</i>	78
<i>The Displacement of Austria</i>	84
<i>From Luxembourg to Sedan</i>	87
5 Realpolitik and Militarism, 1871–90	93
<i>A New International Setting</i>	93
<i>The Dreikaiserbund and the Near Eastern Question, 1872–8</i>	99
<i>The ‘Bismarckian’ States System, 1879–84</i>	106
<i>The Breakdown of the ‘Bismarckian’ System</i>	111

6	Imperial Rivalries and European Diplomacy, 1890–1907	121
	<i>Crises Deferred: Europe in the Early 1890s</i>	121
	<i>The ‘New Imperialism’ and the Near Eastern Question in the mid-1890s</i>	126
	<i>The Powers at the Turn of the Century</i>	132
	<i>From the Hague Peace Conference to the Anglo–French Entente</i>	135
7	From the Anglo–Russian Entente to the Balkan Wars	142
	<i>The Bosnian Crisis and the Growing German Problem</i>	142
	<i>Russia and the Central Powers in South-eastern Europe</i>	150
	<i>Crises in the Balkans, 1912–13</i>	154
8	To August 1914 and the End of an Era	159
	<i>Preliminary Observations</i>	159
	<i>To Sarajevo</i>	163
	<i>The Outbreak of War</i>	169
9	A Summing Up	177
	<i>Notes and References</i>	181
	<i>Suggestions for Further Reading</i>	193
	<i>Index</i>	197

PREFACE

The outbreak of the First World War marked the end – by European standards – of a relatively peaceful era between the great powers. A number of mid-nineteenth century conflicts (the Crimea, the Italian and German wars of unification) had been preceded by 39 years of peace, while France's defeat in 1870–1 ushered in a spell of no less than 43 years – a record which stood until 1988. Many scholars see the 1914 war as the cataclysmic breakdown of a sophisticated state system dating from 1814–15 – or even from 1648. While one may be a little sceptical concerning efforts to quantify the differing intensities of conflict in the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there can be no doubt that by any criteria the middle era was markedly more peaceful than what went before or followed after. In particular the mid-nineteenth century conflicts were in no way comparable to the wars of 1792–1815, 1914–18, or even to the American Civil War. Raymond Aron argues that 'What needs to be explained is not how the war of 1914 became "hyperbolic" ...', but how peaceful relations between the powers in Europe were interrupted by no more than relatively limited and only moderately destructive wars.

It is evident that answers to this question do not lie simply in the statecraft of the era, but scholars nevertheless have devoted not a little attention to what Richard Langhorne describes as 'the heyday of diplomacy'. Although this was no 'golden age', he argues that here was a time when the 'instinctive responses of statesmen ... [had been] conditioned by their surprisingly common conception of an existing European international system'. This had declined rapidly from 1890, so that by 1914 'the old ways survived more by inertia than the conscious will of statesmen'. Nevertheless even before 1890 he stresses the elusiveness of the so-called Concert of Europe, and its reliance on 'attitudes of mind' and the fears generated by recent revolutions and wars. It is the aim of the present extended essay to examine European statecraft from Metternich to Bethmann Hollweg

and to test some of the more extravagant claims made on behalf of what Paul Schroeder has described as 'consensual politics'.

I should like to take this opportunity to express my thanks to Dr Mark Cornwall for providing me with so many useful references, ideas and information on Austria–Hungary, and for listening so patiently as I held forth on certain sections of this book. He was a most constructive, yet sympathetic critic. Meanwhile our ever cheerful Departmental Secretary, Helen Carmichael, provided moral support and the all-important coffee and biscuits.

C. J. Bartlett
Broughty Ferry