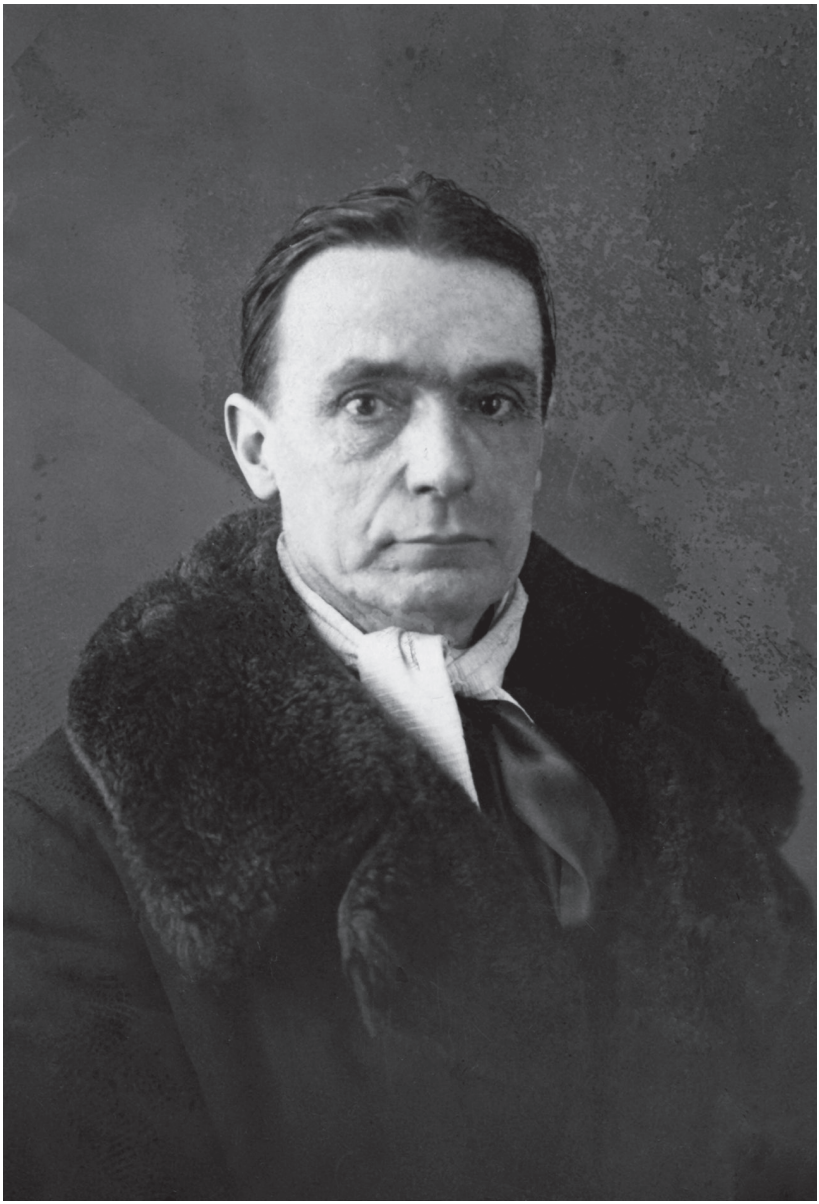

Rudolf Steiner, 1916
© Rudolf Steiner Archives, Dornach

The historian George Kennan referred to World War I and the destruction—or self-destruction—it brought to "old Central Europe" as "the great seminal catastrophe" of the violent twentieth century. Almost sixty million soldiers went into battle in those four years; one in every six died—6,000 per day on average. They fought, were wounded, and killed, at altitudes of up to 4,000 meters and in the deep of the Atlantic Ocean. Germany alone sent more than thirteen million soldiers into battle; two million died and more than four million were wounded. In the military hospitals mirrors were banned—seeing their own reflections would have been too cruel and horrendous an experience for the "men with broken faces."

The physical and mental destruction and devastation came at a scale civilized humanity had never seen in all the millennia of its existence—in this first war fought with mass-produced high-powered machine guns and artillery, where modern means of transport meant maximum troop mobilization. Not only humans, but flora and fauna, soil and rivers were engulfed in an unfathomable abyss—vast parts of Northern France and Flanders, once flourishing landscapes, were turned into muddy deserts riddled with craters—and other regions did not fare any better. "Materialism has met its karma in this most horrible of wars. In certain respects this war is the karma of materialism," Rudolf Steiner said as early as May 1915, when the war was only in its tenth month.[2] Many countries lost almost an entire younger generation of leading figures and, with them, an essential part of their future. The European economy collapsed, as did international trade

and much of what had been important in "Yesterday's World" (Stefan Zweig). In Vienna, the satirist Karl Kraus was writing his epic *The Last Days of Mankind,* which he had begun in 1915, prepublishing parts of it in his journal "*Die Fackel*" (the torch). The war was almost apocalyptic and would cast its shadow over the entire twentieth century. Its aftereffects would engrave themselves into the history of the world and of humanity, most of all into the destiny of Europe, which forfeited the leading—economic, cultural, and intellectual—position it had commanded in the pre-war world.[3]

"*That it had to come to this was foreseeable years ago, also that these events had to come in this year. It was destiny.*"[4] Rudolf Steiner thought that World War I was foreseeable, but its outbreak, sparked by a terrorist attack, came as a surprise: on June 28, 1914 the nineteen-year-old Serbian student Gavrilo Princip murdered Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir apparent to the Habsburg throne, in Sarajevo. Franz Ferdinand was the hope of Austria-Hungary, if not of all of Central Europe. Sympathetic to the Slavs, he was one of a group of friends who advocated their equality within the royal-imperial monarchy, which had previously been mostly concerned with Austria and Hungary. As a federalist, Franz Ferdinand was keen to promote the association of the many individual nations that made up the monarchy. His support of a southern Slav community of nations went against Serbia's hegemonic aspirations with respect to the Balkans. Gavrilo Princip, the assassin, belonged to a terrorist commando of seven young Serbs who dreamt of a greater Serbian empire and were keen to make the idea of a nation state a political issue in the Balkans. They were equipped by the Serb military intelligence, and the assassination was carried out on the Serbian national day of mourning. When news of the attack broke, someone showed Rudolf Steiner the newspaper in Dornach. "I shall never forget Rudolf Steiner's face in that moment: the expression of horror and sadness in his widened

eyes as he uttered the words, 'Now disaster has struck.'"[5] His Russian coworker Natalie Turgeniev-Pozzo wrote in her memoirs,

> The doctor looked deeply shocked, as if struck by lightning; we hardly dared to look at him. He stared at us in silence, as if he wanted to read in our faces how much of the news we had absorbed. He briefly asked some people, "Have you read about the murder in Sarajevo?" It was an exciting event for us, but for him it was total disaster. Yet, he did not say a word.[6]

Unlike most of his Dornach coworkers Rudolf Steiner knew the explosiveness of the situation in the Balkans very well. He was seventeen, in his last year of school in Vienna, when Bismarck, in the Berlin Treaty of 1878, put the formerly Turkish provinces of Bosnia and Herzegovina under Habsburg occupation. Wars ensued over the disintegrating Ottoman Empire. As early as 1908, the Austrian chief of the general staff, Franz Conrad von Hoetzendorf, had suggested a preventive war against Serbia, Russia, and Italy, warning that the increasingly aggressive Serbia was growing into a dangerous force. The country, or rather its political leaders, saw themselves as the national (and nationalist) center of all southern Slavs. While largely isolated internationally, it could rely on Russian support because Russia pursued its own interests in the area.

The weeks following the assassination were tense and marked by political debate. On July 23, 1914—not quite a month after Franz Ferdinand's death—a representative of Austria-Hungary handed the Serb government a tough ultimatum, demanding the suppression of any steps against Austria-Hungary and the inclusion of Viennese officials in the formal inquest into the assassination, threatening with invasion if the demands were not accepted. Only two days later, both states mobilized their armies. Austria-Hungary had the support of Germany, Serbia that of Russia. "The specter of the World War suddenly raised its head in our Dornach life; it seemed so incredible that we refused to believe it; Europe would not permit a war; and so we comforted each other: the Russians the Germans, the Germans the

Russians," Andrei Bely wrote in his memoirs.[7] The events that followed the assassination in July and early August 1914, which would lead to the outbreak of a disastrous war, were highly dramatic. Rudolf Steiner would later speak of "terribly fast steps."[8]

On July 5, a week after the terrorist attack, the Austrian chef de cabinet, Count Alexander von Hoyos, took a letter to Kaiser Wilhelm II, in the New Palace in Potsdam, conveying Kaiser Franz Josef's plea for support of the steps he was about to take. Wilhelm II read the letter over breakfast and declared that Vienna "should deal quickly and firmly with Serbia, and certainly such action would have Germany's support."[9] In the afternoon of the same day, in the absence of his chief of staff, Helmuth von Moltke, he secured the support of his Privy Council, which in the end

> . . . pledged its support for Vienna's determination to create a Balkan league centered on Bulgaria. What Austria-Hungary did with Serbia was its own affair, but it should be assured that if Russia intervened it would have Germany's backing. This has become known as the "blank check." Vienna had asked for it and Vienna would cash it. All that counted, as far as the rest of the world was concerned, was that Berlin issued it. The foreign secretaries in St. Petersburg and London could not imagine that the weak, disintegrating Austria-Hungary would act without Germany pulling the strings—and they wildly overrated the German decision. The members of the Privy Council acted with a degree of nonchalance that was more gross miscalculation than skillful planning, more botch than conspiracy. Falkenhayn, the Prussian minister of war, wrote to von Moltke to inform him of the events and that there was no need for him to hurry back, and promptly went on leave himself. . . . Not one leading politician recognized the gravity of the situation.[10]

In the end Serbia accepted most of the points in the ultimatum, but not those directly injurious to its national sovereignty. General mobilization ensued—also of Russia and Germany and their subordinate allies, France and England. On July 28, Helmuth von Moltke, shocked at what had happened, wrote in an "Estimate of the political situation" that "It goes without saying that no nation in Europe would have any

other but a purely human interest in a conflict between Austria and Serbia, if it was not for the fact that the situation holds the danger of general political complications that are already threatening to unleash a world war."[11] This "world war" broke out a few days later, "at the zero point of political effectiveness"[12]—when political considerations had given way to military plans and strategies. "We are muddled into war," the British politician David Lloyd George said, looking back. He was a member of the Entente's Supreme War Council and, from 1916, Britain's prime minister.[13]

Years of international tensions in Europe and in the neighboring territories had preceded the outbreak of war—belligerent impulses, plans and strategies that now—in August 1914—erupted, setting off a chain of destruction. The creation of the German Empire at Versailles, in 1871, had done something toward upsetting the balance of powers and forces in Central Europe, and had met with much resistance in the surrounding countries, most of all in France and Britain, but also Russia. Otto von Bismarck, the first chancellor of the German Empire, which he had been instrumental in creating, made every effort after the successful foundation of the empire to prevent a serious conflict in Europe, emphasizing again and again in Berlin that the German Empire, after the war with France, "had to live in peace with Europe now, if it was not to expose itself to fatal danger." In 1882 he said in the *Reichstag*, "If there is any merit I deserve in foreign politics it is for preventing a hostile coalition against Germany after 1871."[14] Bismarck had recognized early how problematic the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine in the German–French war of 1870/71 was, and he had decided in its favor only under pressure from the German people. "It will become an uncomfortable burden for us."[15]

Germany was an economically thriving country and leading in technology; through and after the creation of the German Empire it was on its way to becoming the first military and industrial power on the continent. Determined to gain superiority over revanchist

France—and permanently worried that France would liaise with Russia against it—Germany kept increasing its expenditures on armament. The fear of a great, Pan-European war had stalked the country since the final decades of the nineteenth century. In 1890, Helmuth von Moltke wrote about his grim forebodings of a "thirty-year war of nations" in a letter,[16] and in the early years of the twentieth century (1905) he spoke of the "threatening firebrand of a murderous European war" appearing on the horizon.[17] Already in 1887 Friedrich Engels foresaw a war unprecedented in its expansion and severity,

> Eight to ten million soldiers will kill each other and ravage Europe as no swarm of locusts ever could. The devastations of the Thirty Years War will be compressed into three or four years and spread across the entire continent; starvation, disease and the barbarization of armies and nations will be brought about by acute misery. The hopeless breakdown of our artificial machinery of trade, industry and credit will end in bankruptcy; the old states and their wisdom will collapse, so that the crowns will roll in the streets in their dozens, and no one will be there to pick them up; it will be impossible to foresee how all this will end and who will be the victor in this fight; but one outcome is certain: general exhaustion and conditions that will facilitate the ultimate victory of the working class.[18]

Bismarck tried for a long time—unsuccessfully—to form an alliance with Britain; what he did achieve was Britain's benevolent neutrality toward his policies. He knew how critical leading circles in Britain viewed Germany's rise in continental Europe—disturbed by its position, which endangered or impaired their own imperial intentions globally and on the continent. Unlike Wilhelm II, Bismarck did not favor colonialism, which he considered an expensive folly. Great Britain, on the other hand, ruled over a fifth of the world and a quarter of the world's population in 1900, had the most powerful navy (in particular as a means of protecting its trade with India, the "crown jewel" of the British Empire) and saw itself as a globally leading power. "I believe that the British race is the greatest of the governing races that the world has ever seen," claimed British Colonial

Secretary Joseph Chamberlain.[19] As early as the 1880s, Britain prepared a Franco-Russian alliance against Germany, by systematically reducing Russian-British tensions and overcoming its conflicts with the French, which were mostly over colonial questions. In the 1880s and 1890s secret maps circulated in Britain, showing a new order on the continent following a potential great war that would eliminate the Habsburg Monarchy, reduce the size of Germany and create a "Slav Federation" that was to take the place of the old Russia.[20]

On a map from 1890 the word "desert" is written above the Russian territory—"states for socialist experiments."[21] The English theosophist C. G. Harrison, who possessed a remarkable degree of occult knowledge, also stressed in a lecture in 1893 that the Slavs were not only particularly important for the next cultural era, but that their "national character" allowed them to carry out "socialist, political and economic experiments that would meet with countless difficulties in Western Europe."[22] Other English theosophists—Charles Leadbeater for instance—pointed out that Europe would speak English in the future and that England would be the "teacher" of the Slavs while effectively blotting out the old European center. Russia, on the other hand, entertained expansive "Pan-Slavic" plans in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, despite the immense problems it faced at home.

The Franco–Russian alliance, intended and prepared by Britain against Germany for strategic reasons, was accomplished in 1894, four years after the failed extension of the "Reinsurance Treaty" between Germany and Russia, and after the passage of a secret military convention in August 1892 that foresaw mutual Franco-Russian support should either of them be attacked. "It mentioned explicitly that, in the case of war, France and Russia would mobilize immediately so that Germany would 'have to fight in the East and West simultaneously.'"[23] It was pointed out repeatedly that the convention was purely defensive, a means of warding off any plans of attack Germany might harbor. Georges Clemenceau, later the prime minister of France, wrote in the year of the convention (1894) in a newspaper article that Russia would

in future be the "instrument" of France's "complete restoration" and "revenge," conceding that "No one would believe it if we said the opposite; so we can just as well admit it."[24] Leo Tolstoy spoke of a "war alliance" that he fully condemned. And indeed, its completion heralded the beginning of the pre-war period—as well as the close military and industrial cooperation between the two countries. In 1904, Britain entered into an *Entente Cordiale* with France and, in 1907, agreed a balance of interests with Russia. All that united the three states was their opposition to Germany and their strategic and political interests, since their individual constitutions—republic, constitutional monarchy, and tsarist autocracy—could not have been more different.

This constellation ensured Britain's effective presence on the continent and Britain saw it as a way of exerting influence on future developments, in particular on the economic and political situation in Germany.

Germany's development in Europe in the second half of the century was not consistent with British interests. Its nature and orientation were difficult to gauge and cause for mistrust and suspicion. Under its fickle, ambitious, and impulsive Kaiser, who was plagued by an inferiority complex, the German Empire embarked on a massive naval program, showing off its Prussian militarism to the rest of the world. Wilhelm II was not a consistent imperialist or annexationist. Capricious, unpredictable and of limited intelligence, he liked making vociferous pro-German speeches, but he was, in fact, not keen on war even if he indulged in plans of expanding and modernizing his military navy. The navy gave Germany kudos, ensured its presence on the world stage, and the possibility to participate in the competition for overseas colonies. Unlike Alfred von Tirpitz, the head of the German naval office, the Kaiser did not want heavy battleships and maximum firepower, because—unlike von Tirpitz—he neither foresaw, nor was he willing to prepare for, the imminent naval battle with Britain. Instead he relied, to the very end, on the possibility that a war with

The new Eastern Europe based on a Pan-Slavonic concept, 1876
(From: GA 173c or John Mill: The Ottomans in Europe, or Turkey in the Present Crisis. *London 1876)*

London could still be avoided—out of respect for each other's greatness. As in France, Britain, and Russia there were militant nationalists in Germany, too, who did their best to attract attention. There was the racist "Pan-German League" that propagated the superiority of the German people and a new European and global order—a "pan-Germanism"—informed by the prevailing social Darwinism—that would stand up to pan-Slavism, to British imperialism, and to French chauvinism. Wilhelm II did not feel personally attracted to these forces—but the "German Empire" nevertheless constituted a problem, not only for Britain. According to Rudolf Steiner this empire was founded in 1871 without any essential goals to justify its existence.[25] Contrary to its former development and its intellectual, cultural, and sociopolitical history[26] it had, in the second half of the nineteenth century, adopted the conventional idea of a nation state and pursued the exclusion of Austria, its *realpolitik* renounced any form of the idealism that was still essential to the Frankfurt Assembly of 1848. In 1866, Friedrich Daumer, a teacher and friend of Kaspar Hauser, wrote in a letter, "We will be the slaves of the Prussian-dynastic military despotism. This superficial demeanor will not bring salvation or benefit to humanity or to peoples."[27] Four years later, on December 31, 1870, even the Prussian crown prince noted in his French-war diary:

> At this hour it appears that we are not loved nor respected, only feared. We are thought capable of all manners of evil and mistrusted more and more. Such sentiments are not restricted to this war; this is what Bismarck's cherished idea of "blood and iron" has led to! What use is all the power, belligerence, fame and glory to us, if we meet with hatred and distrust wherever we go, and if our every step is eyed with suspicion? Bismarck may have made us great and mighty, but he has robbed us of friends, of sympathies in the world, and—of our good conscience. I still believe that Germany can make moral conquests, rightfully, and that it can be united, free and mighty without blood and iron. It could rule, not with the power of arms, but with its culture, science and its way of life; they would earn us respect, love—and honor. The bold and fierce Junker wanted something else. His plotting and

> scheming prevented the victory of a good cause in 1864. In 1866 he crushed Austria but failed to unite Germany.... Our future will have the fine but immensely difficult task of freeing our precious country from the false suspicions the world associates with us today. We must show that the power we gained will not bring dangers but blessings: the blessings of peace and culture. But it will be immensely difficult to fight against the blind adoration of raw violence and outer success, to enlighten the minds, and to revert from ambition and rivalry to goals that are good and wholesome![28]

One year later, in 1871 and, provocatively, on French soil, the powerful national German "centralized state" was founded and placed under the direction of Prussia with its traditions, ranks, and interests—a federation of German princes led by the Prussian king—without the participation of the people or of local and national parliaments, whose guiding principles were utilitarianism and success. The decision to exclude Austria and to reject the idea of a supranational, federative, multinational state—as a way of restructuring Central Europe politically and socially—had already occurred in 1866. The many voices still inspired by German Idealism were ignored. "The Germans seem to me to be destined to be a people of peoples, able to represent humanity to others," Schelling once noted, and many leading figures followed him,[29] to no avail. A unitary state was created that glorified its military forces, placed its foreign and military policies under the direct control of the imperial chancellor, demoted parliament, and excluded from its constitution the human rights agreed upon in Frankfurt's St. Paul's Church. The liberal bourgeoisie, still a major political influence in Germany in the 1840s and 1850s, withdrew increasingly, and all it stood for in the end was economic liberalism, unrestricted individual development ("*Freie Bahn dem Tüchtigen*"—clear the way for the dynamic), and achievement and performance in all fields of life. Renate Riemeck spoke of the "materialization of bourgeois life"[30] in her depiction of the self-praise, the sense of security and power, and the pervasion of life by militarism that went together with a fatal reduction in political and intellectual

foresight. Patriotism, nationalism, militarism, political ambition, warmongering, and military pride were widespread in Germany and its neighboring states at the end of the nineteenth century; these views and moods, which were founded on Darwinist thinking and its paradigmatic "fight for existence," "survival of the fittest," and "natural selection," created a strong ethos of competition and belligerence.

During the early twentieth century, Germany was the leading industrial power in Europe and in the world, second only to the U.S., in steel production, chemical manufacturing,and electrical engineering. German engineers were the pioneers of industrial technologies, its scientists holding leading positions everywhere in the world—a fact that greatly enhanced the self-image of the educated and economic middle classes. Wilhelm II, who was so very sensitive to the wishes of the middle classes and the emerging mass media, was not the only one to think that "the unfolding of outer power and glory was in Germany's nature."[31] The country fled from internal political conflicts into an expansive foreign policy that increasingly isolated the empire, while creating at the same time a sense of being surrounded "by a world of enemies." Germany was certainly feared, but there was also fear *in* Germany, fear of its many rivals. "But in the era of alliance blocs, chauvinist mass newspapers, navalism, and breakneck export growth, there was no way back to the narrower horizons of Bismarckian diplomacy—not for the German commercial and political classes and certainly not for the man on the throne."[32]

In the Balkan crises and conflicts that preceded the outbreak of World War I Germany supported its ally Austria-Hungary only half-heartedly, denying it any kind of blank check. Wilhelm II had made abundantly clear that he would not "expose us to a military involvement" on Vienna's account. ("I could not carry the responsibility for that before my conscience or my people." November 7, 1912)[33] In 1912/1913 neither the Kaiser nor his chief of general staff, Helmuth von Moltke, were keen to be drawn into the quarrel with Russia,

France, and Britain that would most likely be the result of a conflict over the Balkans. Wilhelm II had always urged restricting conflicts and finding local solutions. For him, Britain's attitude was an essential factor, and he knew that there was a danger that the British "balance of power policy" was in reality a "playing off [of] the Great Powers against each other to England's advantage," as he wrote in a letter on December 8, 1912.[34] In 1913 the Russian government presented a military program that envisaged an army three times the size of Germany's by 1917. In early 1914, according to an article in a Russian military journal, "...not just the troops but all Russians need to become accustomed to the fact that we must prepare for a fatal strike on the Germans and that the German kingdoms must be destroyed, even if it should cost hundreds of thousands of lives."[35] The German ambassador objected in vain. Helmuth von Moltke was greatly concerned and increasingly pessimistic about Russia and about Germany's position in Europe. Russia and France had almost twice the military power of the German *Wehrmacht*, and Austria-Hungary seemed doomed altogether—it had the worst equipped army of all the great powers and was under constant threat in the Balkans.

The German leaders feared the possible dissolution of the Habsburg monarchy as a result of ethnic minority conflicts; and they were not afraid only of a possible chain reaction but were also concerned that, after such a dissolution and with the uncertain loyalty of its—and Austria-Hungary's—ally Italy, Germany would end up in complete diplomatic and military isolation. As early as March 1914 Moltke pleaded for a preventive war—as long as Germany was still defendable—but with his fatalism and insecurity as to how to proceed he was unable to win others over. Neither he nor any other German military officers or politicians were making systematic preparations for a war at that time; and Wilhelm II insisted that the "greatest reserve and caution must be the general principle of our policy."[36] Like many others, Moltke had long been convinced that the prevailing mood of competition and hostility made a European war seem unavoidable. He had tried to keep the German army abreast of the

European arms race, logistically, technically, and numerically, and had been granted a considerable increase in troop strength as late as 1913. ("A weak Germany would be the greatest danger for a peaceful Europe," he had emphasized in a letter of 1907.[37]) When he realized in July 1914 that the Serbian ultimatum would lead to war, he was distressed and dejected, and he wrote in a situation report on July 30 that there was "hardly a trace of hope." To his aide-de-camp he said a day later, "*This war will grow into a world war. No one knows how it will all end*."[38] In a memorandum to the German chancellor, Bethmann Hollweg, Moltke outlined "the mechanism of the alliances and mobilizations" in clear and unambiguous terms, describing how they would result in a great, general war.[39] "This is how matters will and must develop unless a miracle prevents, at the last minute, a war that will obliterate the culture of almost all of Europe for decades on end. Germany will not unleash this terrible war."[40] "The Franco–Russian alliance that has so often been praised for its purely defensive nature, that was said to have been created only to ward off any German plans of attack, has now taken effect and the cultured European nations will begin to tear each other apart."[41]

In early August 1914, Andrei Bely wrote of the situation in Dornach:

> The first days of this month went by in intense work; never before had we worked with such intensity; it was as if we had realized that our best workers would soon be taken from us; concerned questions pervaded the working mood everywhere. News bulletins appeared on the scaffolding and everyone made a dash for them, "What has happened?" The international situation grew darker every day; the workers gathered during the lunch hour and endless discussions ensued on whether or not there would be a war.[42]

On August 1, Rudolf Steiner attended a performance of Parzival in Bayreuth. In the afternoon news spread that Wilhelm II had signed the general mobilization order for Germany. The journey back to Switzerland—in Helene von Röchling's car to Stuttgart and on from

Preis 4 Heller.

Neuigkeits Welt-Blatt

Herausgeber: August Kirsch.

Extra-Ausgabe

vom 5. August 1914.

England hat an Deutschland den Krieg erklärt.

Die Sensation des heutigen Tages ist, daß England infolge des Durchmarsches deutscher Truppen durch das neutral erklärte Belgien an Deutschland den Krieg erklärte.

Das k. k. Telegraphen-Korrespondenzbureau verlautbart soeben folgende Mitteilung hierüber:

„Berlin, 4. August (Dienstag) Mitternacht. Das Wolffsche Bureau meldet: Kurz nach sieben Uhr abends erschien der englische Botschafter Sir Edward Goschen im Auswärtigen Amt, um den Krieg zu erklären und seine Pässe zu fordern.

Deutschland befindet sich demnach gegenwärtig mit Rußland und England im offiziellen, mit Frankreich und Belgien in latentem Kriegszustand.

Neuigkeits-Welt-Blatt *newspaper report, August 5, 1914*

there to Basel by train—was testing and fraught with obstacles. "Behind us, a world sank into sorrow and misery," Marie von Sivers wrote later.[43] On August 3, 1914, she informed Johanna Mücke in Berlin, "I have never seen the Doctor as downcast as he was because of this war. I believe he really still wanted to have a look at Germany."[44] Marie Steiner-von Sivers wrote later that the day when the war broke out was "the most difficult day in Rudolf Steiner's life."[45] Natalie Turgeniev-Pozzo also wrote in her memoirs, "On the day when war was declared he said again and again that everything would go to pieces now."[46]

On August 2 Germany asked for permission to march through Belgium to France, pledging to pay all the costs. Belgian neutrality had been guaranteed by Prussia at the London Conference of 1831. Following Belgium's refusal the German army occupied the country on August 3; one day later Britain declared war on Germany and imposed a trade embargo on the German Empire. Germany responded by placing a naval blockade, with mines and patrol boats, around the island. On August 5, the Committee of Imperial Defense in London took the decision to attack all German colonies. "British, French, Indian and South-African troops were sent to conquer German East Africa, German South-West Africa, Togo and Cameroon; at the same time Australian, New Zealand and Japanese divisions were to attack the German possessions in the Pacific and China."[47] On that day, the Austrian writer Arthur Schnitzler wrote in his diary, in Vienna, "World war. World ruin. Monstrous, egregious news . . . We are witnessing a monstrous moment in world history. In only a few days the face of the world has thoroughly changed. It is like a dream! Everyone is at a loss."[48]

Germany marched into Belgium in the hope that France would be quickly attacked and conquered. Moltke's predecessor, Alfred von Schlieffen, who was appointed chief of the general staff in 1891, had devised a plan some time before that secured Germany's survival if it should ever have to fight its allied opponents France and Russia at the same time. Schlieffen relied on the organizational strength and

efficient leadership of the superior German army (superior at least to that of Russia), when he developed a detailed strategy that foresaw a victory within six weeks in the West, using massive force levels and precise concentration of troops, so that the army could then immediately be deployed to the East. Russia would need time to mobilize its army because transport routes were long and its organizational structures underdeveloped. And the German *Wehrmacht* would use that time to press ahead.

Helmuth von Moltke adhered to Schlieffen's plan, making few alterations. This plan had been kept strictly secret and, up until 1913, was not even known to the German chancellor and minister of war. Moltke was convinced, too, that a war on two fronts could not be won, and he invaded Belgium convinced that he was merely anticipating attacks from France and Russia. Like Schlieffen, he thought that the French army had to be conquered by the time Russia mobilized its forces, but also by the time the British troops arrived, if Germany was not to be destroyed by the superior power of its opponents. The German army acted under enormous time pressure, and the situation in Belgium soon escalated when the Wehrmacht came up against unexpectedly strong and prolonged resistance.

> With their losses increasing the soldiers lose their nerve. If they meet with the slightest opposition they set fire to villages and arrest and shoot alleged *"franc-tireurs,"* armed civilians. Thousands of Belgians are fleeing from the atrocities of the "Huns" or "barbarians" by crossing the border into neutral Holland. One of the small towns wantonly destroyed by the Germans is Dinant, a picturesque resort on the river Meuse, whose name now stands for a massacre: Saxon troops trying to repair the damaged bridge are fired at—supposedly by franc-tireurs. The Germans take punitive action on August 23, set fire to houses, even entire streets, they pillage and murder 674 of the 8,000 inhabitants, women and men, many children and four babies—all of them said to be armed. Images of the destroyed town travel around the world, provoking an outrage against the German "barbarians."[49]

Only two days later, on August 25, the occupation of the old Belgian university town of Leuven explodes into brutal devastation,

> On August 25, there is sudden gunfire. The soldiers panic; they feel they are surrounded by "franc-tireurs" and embark on a five days of revenge, destroying the town, setting fire and holding mass execution by firing squads of alleged "franc-tireurs." As the fighting goes on, the beautiful medieval university goes up in flames, having come under artillery fire: the entire world-famous library, home to precious manuscripts and books that have been collected over centuries, is razed to the ground. The news causes uproar all over the world. . . .[50]

All in all, more than 6,500 civilians were killed in Belgium and the country was placed under strict German surveillance. During the war a great number of forced laborers were taken to Germany, and countless Belgians sought refuge in other countries. Wilhelm II had plans for the future that were as wide-ranging as they were abstruse. His idea was that France, once it was conquered, should be "ethnically cleansed" and then assigned to his petty officers and their men.[51] He did not win support for these plans; but the pictures and news that made the headlines cast a horrible light on Germany and the horror was further enhanced by the French and British falsified reports about women and children who had their hands hacked off. Belgium had been a neutral, disinterested and largely unprotected country.

In Dornach near Basel, in the equally "neutral" Switzerland, everything was still peaceful, although one could hear the gunfire in nearby Alsace and see the searchlights of the German army from the Johannes Building. It had not been possible to complete the building by August 1914 or to inaugurate it with a fifth Mystery Drama. Everything had changed. On September 13, 1914, Rudolf Steiner spoke in a lecture about the situation in Dornach in early August:

> What our friends first heard in this building was the sound of the cannons thundering on the battle fields of Alsace, very close to

> here. And so the place, for which we invoked, as it were, the echo of words devoted to the spirit, first witnessed the thunder of cannons detonating not far from us. Other friends had, in a way also symbolically, seen something we had expected to see as our great ideal. We had expected to experience the light of the spirit, of the spiritual worlds, here—but what we saw in the nights was the light from Fort Istein that was visible from far away and that pervaded our building for the duration of four minutes: *the sound and light of present events!*[52]

In August 1914 people from seventeen nations were working on the building in Dornach. All of them wished to stay and continue with their working together. But the situation soon became very complicated. Dornach and the land around the *Johannesbau* were close to the German *and* French borders, and the surrounding Swiss villages grew more and more restless every day. Panic spread among the population because the borders of their country were not fortified and their own soldiers had not been mobilized. People feared a French or German invasion—similar to what had happened in Belgium. Andrei Bely wrote in his notes,

> The Swiss were thunderstruck by the violation of Belgium's neutrality. People said that it was inevitable that either the French or the Germans would cross into Switzerland to push forward with a pincer movement, the former to the German Baden region, the latter to the French town of Belfort. In either case, Dornach would be on the invader's route; if the French intruded, the whole region would end up under heavy artillery fire from Baden. They pointed to the Baden hills, only a short distance away, saying: Those hills are riddled with cannons; not a trace will be left of Dornach and Arlesheim; everything will be destroyed by gunfire; we never even considered how close our own house might be to the German cannons. But we thought of the "building"; would it be spared? The people in the villages spread such incredible panic; they bought enormous amounts of food, saying that soon there would be hunger, that Switzerland would be cut off from supplies, and that one needed to buy enough provisions to last through the war. The saddest sight was caused by the mobilization; a quarter of the

> population of Basel and its surroundings were German nationals; the men in the families were the first to go to war. They went to sign up in the Basel suburb of Lörrach on the Swiss border (in Baden), returning saddened from there—they had to go to war. The building presented an even gloomier sight; all the German workers had immediately gone off to fight. Our best people, our carvers—Wolffhügel, Geier, Mitscher, Strauss—were also conscripted. Many tried to be cheerful, saying their good-byes with jests and banter; but one felt the heaviness beneath the surface.[53]
>
> The authorities informed the population that public transport would be discontinued if the country's neutrality were violated; trains and trams would be used to evacuate national property. Those living in the area were told to seek safety by crossing the Gempen, the hill behind the "building," and fleeing into the mountains around Dornach and Arlesheim. It was said that the Swiss had carried heavy guns to the Gempen; Swiss resistance had begun. The whole area up to the Gempen (Dornach, Arlesheim, Aesch) would be evacuated as soon as the first alarm sounded.[54]
>
> People were packing, getting their vehicles ready to flee into the mountains; one day we were called to the canteen and told to get our money and luggage ready and to sleep in our clothes. We expected the alarm to be raised during the night, and we were instructed to assemble immediately in front of the canteen and make our way to the mountains with the Doctor.[55]

Andrei Bely wrote about Rudolf Steiner's attitude in this situation:

> He was quiet, calm, and sad. We saw him mostly in the canteen, where we gathered at midday, for afternoon tea, and in the evenings. Otherwise we rarely saw him, but he was there every day, walking among us, sitting on a bench somewhere, a great tiredness in his eyes; he came for no particular reason, just wishing to give us courage by being there. But it was clear that our life in Dornach, the building itself, and all of us were in danger.[56]

The expected evacuation never happened in the end. Swiss soldiers soon arrived who were deployed around Basel on the northern slopes of the Jura mountains. They scoured the area in groups, taking up

quarters in the villages. When more and more soldiers appeared at the Dornach building site, which was surrounded by a barbed-wire fence, and demanded admission, Rudolf Steiner showed them around the building, explaining its purpose. Andrei Bely painted an atmospheric picture of the situation in his memoirs:

> …I was on my way [from the canteen] to the building, when I came across a commotion at the entrance: a horde of soldiers, a hundred or so, insisted on seeing the "building," but [Wilhelm von] Heydebrand, who guarded the entrance, refused them firmly and rather sharply, I thought. The soldiers demanded to be let in, starting to push against the fence; more and more of them arrived and I feared they would force their way in if we did not act at once to dissolve the deadlock caused by Heydebrand's lack of sensitivity. Pushing Heydebrand out of the way I opened the gate wide and said to the soldiers, "Do come in—but wait for a moment while I call someone who will guide you through the building." I saw that Heydebrand was furious with me because of my unsolicited intervention. He was about to object but it was too late: the soldiers were charging onto the building plot; "Wait!" I called again and ran to the canteen, to the Doctor, as fast as my legs would carry me; when the Doctor saw me, he rushed toward me, calling, "What is the matter?" Catching my breath, I explained quickly that someone needed to go with the soldiers directly to prevent the situation from taking a turn that would bode ill for the future; the Doctor took in the situation at once and went straight to the soldiers, thanking me for my "*high-handed*" interference.
>
> He began to speak with the soldiers politely, showing them all the details of the building; he gave them an extended tour, took them up onto the scaffolding and explained the forms to them; Heydebrand and I went along; the soldiers, who had been upset by Heydebrand's stubbornness, cheered up visibly. They showed the greatest consideration, refrained from smoking and were impressed with the "building"; there was something childlike about them, as they gaped open-mouthed at the huge columns, stretching their heads from all sides toward the Doctor. They then left contented; the decision was made that anyone who wished could, at an appointed time twice weekly, have a guided tour of the "building";

> crowds of soldiers appeared at those times; I went around with them a few times; the "building" made a deep impression on them and they behaved very properly. As a result, relationships with the troops billeted in the area were very friendly."[57]

The consideration shown by Andrei Bely and Rudolf Steiner proved a blessing for the building and its future in Dornach. The international "anthroposophists" who maintained the building were still strangers in this country, most being tolerated as aliens. The fact that a war was about to break out did nothing to alleviate this situation.

Rudolf Steiner spoke not only with the Swiss soldiers but also with his coworkers. Very earnestly, he said to them on August 13, just two weeks into the war:

> Our building rises from peaceful thoughts and peaceful work. In these times, when everything seems to be in pieces, we will strive to foster harmony in the heart of each one of us so that we each nourish the best thoughts about one another, unclouded by envy or discord. Only then will we be able to continue with what needs doing, unshaken by the painful events. For our work must and will continue even if mountains of obstacles are looming ahead of us. What will happen will happen in the spirit of our movement.[58]

There was no sign of "discord" or patriotic arguments among the nations represented in Dornach when war broke out in early August 1914. This began to change when news arrived from Belgium; yet Rudolf Steiner pointed out again and again how important it was to maintain unity and harmony. "*The spirit bridges the gap that has been torn by brothers meeting as enemies, by disharmony. The present is not as it should be and developments are going against our spiritual stream. We seek to unite what has been dispersed in the world, and people of different nations embrace each other as brothers; within our stream they become brothers.*"[59] In the following years Rudolf Steiner addressed his coworkers in similar terms; he did not ignore "the idiosyncrasies of the individual national qualities"[60] in Dornach,