



Winston Churchill had good personal reasons for ignoring the effect of the First Balkan War in his influential narrative: "The World Crisis, 1911-1918". The crisis came before he gained decisive influence over the Admiralty, and he felt humiliated by the independent minded, effective strategy-making of his staff during the crisis.

Richard Hall called the Balkan Wars a "prelude" to the Great War in his book title. However, new research into preparations for war in Germany and Britain and neutrality defence preparations in Sweden and Denmark 1910-1913 makes clear that the First Balkan War was not only a prelude, it had an important and direct catalytic influence on what happened 21 months later.

In all four countries the First Balkans War directly triggered war/defence preparations of a fundamentally new character, both directly by increasing combat readiness as a response to the crisis, but more importantly by focusing and accelerating the post-crisis national professional military and naval planning as well as the international preparations for war. After the crisis a great power war was no longer just a possibility; the then policy-making professionals of the armed forces considered it inevitable and fast approaching – and they acted accordingly. The war also confirmed them in their conviction that even modern wars could be won in short, decisive campaigns.

These reactions were not a response to the *start* of the general Balkan conflict in mid-October. The war was only expected to bring a humanitarian crisis as Turkey pacified the region after the victory. The actual trigger was Turkey's unexpected total operational

defeat that brought the risks in early November of a Bulgarian capture of Constantinople. The destruction of expectations as well as the balance of power immediately led to crisis reactions in all four observed states far more comprehensive than the previous year's Agadir Crisis did.

A couple of weeks later, when Serbian control of part of the Albanian coast became reality, the development came very close to great power war, and the after effect undermined traditional, bureaucratic and political barriers to effective war or defence preparations.

Based on my new monography "Det lille land før den store krig" (*The small country before the Great War*) the paper cronologically outlines the reactions in all four countries from November 1912 to May 1913.

Responses October 1912

Germany: Nothing important

Great Britain: Nothing important

Sweden (no peace-time readiness):

4 October: Increased defence readiness on the Baltic Island of Gotland that lie exposed to Russian operations

26 October: The liberal government announces its decision to build nu coastal battleships

Denmark (no peace-time readiness):

24 October: Permanent Intelligence Station established by the Navy - first time ever (supplementing the Army General Staff Duty Officer established 1 August 1911 as a response to the Agadir Crisis)

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For the Great Powers, the initially likely and then open regional war brought intensive diplomatic activity, but no significant rise in military or naval readiness. No steps were necessary, because they had operational naval forces, and some of these were in the Mediterranean.

For the small Nordic neutrals the situation was fundamentally different. Their armed forces were pure training-mobilization structures, and in order to develop even a basic defence capability, they had to take extraordinary steps to show determination, to enhance the warning capability and to create operational military formations and most of their naval units. Therefore it is natural that the first reactions to the Balkan War took place in the small countries. These preparations decided what happened in July-August 1914.

Responses November 1912 (Germany-Britain)

Germany:

3 November: Suspicion that the British Royal Navy mobilizes

18 November: Visible increase of readiness level

21 November: The Kaiser in Kiel expects "War of Existence" with Britain

22 November: The Kaiser promises the Austrian Crown Prince and General Staff Chief German support

25 November: The High Seas Fleet units in the Baltic departs for the North Sea and the Kaiser receives the Navy plan for the North Sea for approval.

Great Britain:

25 November: The Admiralty issues the draft of a - first ever - comprehensive plan for war with Germany to the C-in-C Home Fleets (even if it is still unfinished and controversial)

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The Germans had been deeply angered and frustrated by the British support to France during the Agadir Crisis one year earlier. Their leaders considered the result a serious loss of face. Therefore the British denial in early November that the manning of some extra vessels meant naval mobilization had little credibility in Berlin. Nervousness and growing hostility interacted and quickly led to naval war preparations. The German Navy knew that as long as it had parts of its main fleet in the Baltic, it risked a defeat in detail if the Royal Navy started hostilities without warning.

Three weeks into November, both the Albanian coast and Constantinople problems were clear. The former required direct German support to Austria and brought risk of war with the Entente, and the German leadership dispatched the fleet from Kiel to reduce vulnerability.

The British focus at the beginning of the month had been in the Eastern Mediterranean, but by mid-month the intensity of the crisis and the risk of war apparently inspired the fast completion of the first ever modern Royal Navy War Plan. This operational idea in the plan was new, reflecting the failure of an alternative concept during the annual naval manoeuvres in the late summer.

The idea that guided the 25 November plan remained valid during the First World War.

Responses November 1912 (the small neutrals)

Sweden:

15 November: The Council of State decides to authorise service extension of the coast- and border force conscripts (something previously only authorised for the navy)

19 November: Navy Minister ask for increased defence readiness

25 November: Decision to prepare the threatened West Coast areas for neutrality defence

26 November: The Navy minister propose the establishment of fleet detachments for the Kattegat and the Sound and to assemble the Coastal Fleet in the south coast base of Karlskrona.

27 November: The government decides to increase naval readiness.

Denmark:

9 and 16 November: The National Defence Council of the cabinet and armed services meet (the only time ever in peace time) to co-ordinate defence readiness

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In Sweden the Liberal government had the need to prove determination to the highly critical royal family and Conservative opposition. However, the government wanted to do so in a way that underlined its will to guard and defend the neutrality in all directions, not only against the main threat that inspired the opposition: A Russian invasion over the land border in the north. The appearance of the German Navy off the western coast on 25 November highlighted the risk that either the British or the German Navy would use the deep fiords of the Kattegat coast as bases against the opponent, and this brought a quick decision by the government.

The Danish government read the situation in the same way as the Swedish. However with the country lying exposed to German power and with the popular hatred of the Germans generated by the treatment of the Danish minority in North Schleswig, the Danish government considered it essential that the country stayed "*invisible*". Rising defence readiness by mobilization might be seen as directed against Germany and thereby provoke an attack or an ultimatum that would destroy neutrality. Thus the Danish reaction was limited to political-military consultation and co-ordination – and unhappiness that the Swedish steps created popular pressure to do something similar.

Responses December 1912 (Germany-Britain)

2-8 December: Escalation in British-German tension starting with the German Chancellor's speech to the Reichstag and ending with the Kaiser's realization the Britain would support France.

Germany:

8 December: The Kaiser's "War Council": Decision to postpone war if possible, until the Navy was more ready, e.g. the Army had been expanded by more use of the conscript mass and the services had achieved a better coordination for war with Britain. Expected respite 1½ years.

8 December: Germany and Austria agree to participate in the London Ambassadors' Conference.

Rest December: Continued work to increase immediate combat readiness of the Navy and Army.

Great Britain:

16 December: After adjustment in consultation with the C-in-C, the Admiralty issues both the comprehensive "War Plan" for conflict with Germany and the "War Order" to the main fleet (soon to be followed by orders to the independent units).

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The days up to the Kaiser's so-called "Council of War" on 8 December were the climax of the crisis, and only the consensus at the meeting that the services needed more time to finish and focus their war preparations moved Europe back from the brink of a general war.

However, nobody could know at the time that the crisis would not slide out of control by irresponsible Serbian or Bulgarian action – followed by Austrian and Russian response – and the improvements of combat readiness continued (and were monitored by diplomats and intelligence officers).

Responses December 1912 (the small neutrals)

Sweden:

The Navy establishes and maintains the decided neutrality defence on the West and South Coasts

Denmark:

Intensifies its intelligence collection, especially in Germany, and the Chief of the General Staff intelligence travels to alert and motivate his leading agents.

Both:

21 December: The difficult negotiations that have taken place between Denmark and Sweden since 1909 to agree on a common declaration of neutrality is concluded and the declaration signed, with Norway joining.

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In Sweden the decided fleet deployment took place early December.

In Denmark the only permitted action became the intensification of intelligence activities, including pressing the diplomatic service to co-operate with army intelligence.

The Scandinavian agreement of a common declaration of neutrality only came after very difficult negotiations that had started in 1909. It remained valid until the end of First World War.

Responses January-February 1913 (Germany-Britain)

Germany:

The first weeks: Continued improvement of war readiness.

End January: The tension so low that it possible to implement the planned purge of the High Seas Fleet commander, von Holtzendorff.

Great Britain:

Early February: The tensions so low that Churchill can start his bureaucratic attack on the Admiralty War Plan that he considered far too passive.

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Most of January the tension remained high, but at the end of the month both the German and British naval ministers – Tirpitz and Churchill – felt free to move to remove obstacles to their full control of their service.

Responses January-May (the small neutrals)

Sweden:

The Navy maintains the decided neutrality defence on the West and South Coasts

Mid-January: Intelligence from St. Petersburg that the Russians will start a war by raiding the Swedish Navy to put it out of action leads to conflict between Navy and liberal government

24 February: Decision that only the West Coast neutrality detachment is maintained

Denmark:

Mid January: The Army uses the crisis to force the government to take a long postponed, very difficult decision to close down garrisons in Jutland and move them to the main island of Zealand

Mid January: The Navy Staff convinces the Commanding Admiral to approve its operations plan for reactions during the expected stages of a German-British war.

Late spring when the international crisis has been controlled: In spite of the Government's negative attitude, the Army leadership succeeds in getting permission to conduct its first ever large scale mobilization exercise.

Both (and Norway):

Agreed late January to exchange information about decided defence measures

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In the Scandinavian countries the continuing crisis was used by the military/naval professionals to advance what they considered essential defence steps, in Sweden unsuccessfully, as the government rejected to prioritize the Russian threat, in Denmark successfully, getting garrisons moved, achieving agreement on a naval operations plan and having a massive – post-crisis – mobilization exercise carried out.

Denmark and Norway succeeded in getting Sweden to accept giving advance warning of future increase of defence readiness. During the war the practical and political Scandinavian co-operation would become routine.

Responses March-May 1913 (Germany-Britain)

Germany:

The 8 December 1912 decisions implemented in relation to Navy/Army:

- Priorities in force development between and inside the services.
- Detailed plans for necessary common projects (like the organization of the mobile Imperial headquarters).
- Common operational planning as directed by the Kaiser.

Great Britain:

April: A many months considered politically difficult agreement with France about naval co-operation in the Mediterranean and Channel leading to a second War Plan for the main fleet covering a British-French naval war against Germany.

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During the last months of the crisis, “bridges” were built to traditional opponents in both Germany and Britain.

In Germany between the Army and Navy – in one end of the planning spectrum agreeing on how to invade England if so decided – at the other end to allow naval access to the General Staff library in the mobile imperial HQs.

Britain accepted dependence of the French Navy in the Western Mediterranean.