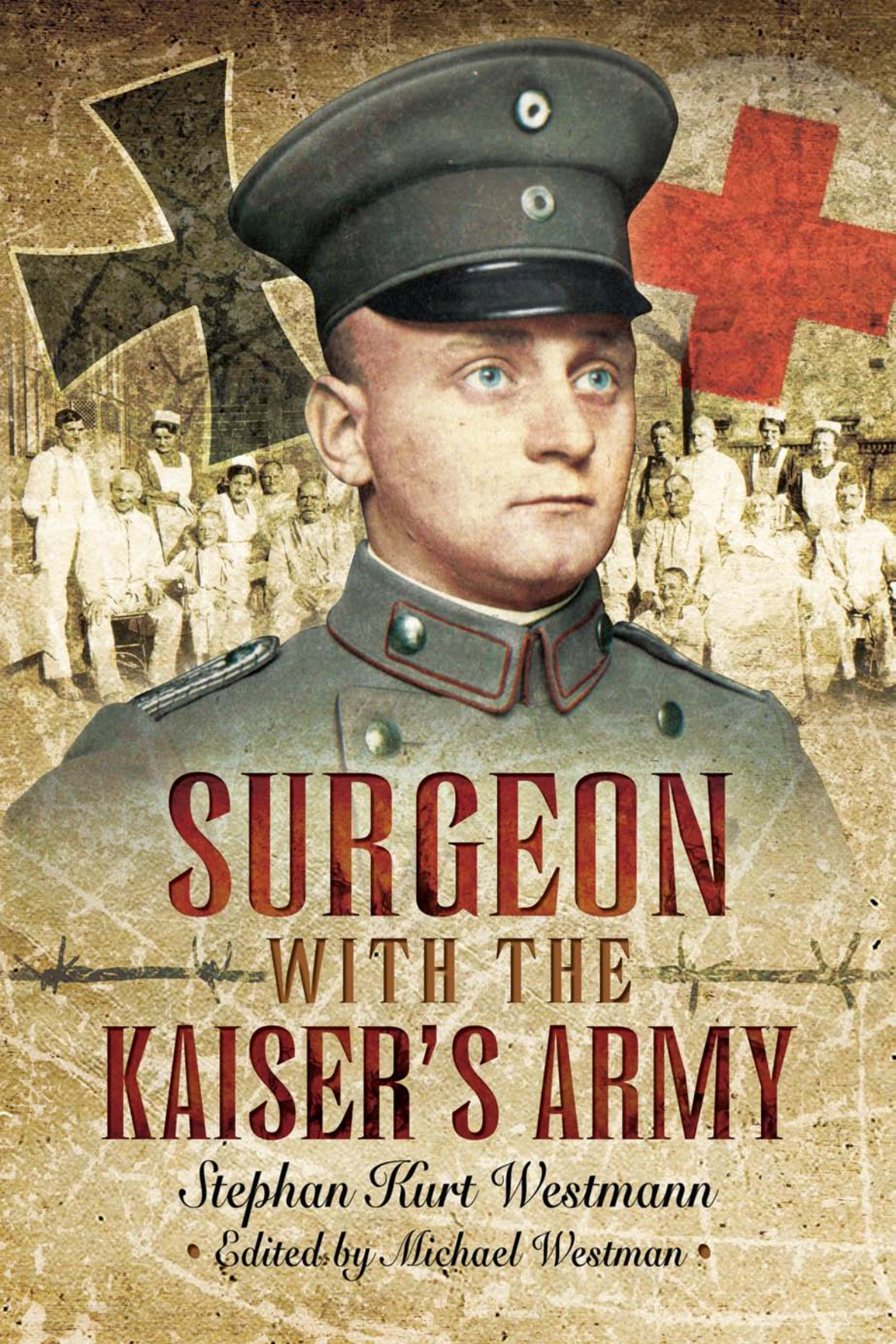

SURGEON WITH THE KAISER'S ARMY

Stephan Kurt Westmann

Edited by Michael Westman

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Introduction

I can just remember my grandfather Stephan Westmann when I was a little boy. He was kindly and greeted me warmly in his heavily German-accented English. We played chess together and his Hertfordshire home was full of interesting artefacts from his life as a surgeon in Germany and Britain.

After he died in 1964, the interviews he gave to camera as part of the BBC *Great War* series were broadcast into Britain's homes. It was the days of black and white television and the series had been made to commemorate fifty years since the start of the 'war to end all wars'.

As an adult, it began to dawn on me that this man had led a double life. Born into a well-to-do Berlin family in 1893, he had volunteered for the Kaiser's army as a young medical student while at Freiburg University. That he survived over four years in the front line has always amazed me. One of life's high achievers, he won both Iron Crosses and a hatful of other medals for the Fatherland. He proved his mettle on the front line, killing enemy soldiers in gruesome hand-to-hand combat and then as a medical officer saving the lives of many others – British as well as German. After the war, being both an outspoken anti-Nazi and Jewish, he was among a number of prominent Berliners whom the Nazis wished to silence as soon as they seized power in 1933 and he fled to Britain prior to the start of the Second World War.

The names of the battlefields where he served will be familiar to all school-age historians and those with an interest in the First World War. What is different about this book is that it was written from a German perspective. As a first-language English speaker myself, I have rewritten my grandfather's book from start to finish, updating the language and the word order in particular. It seems that he wrote the original in German and then had it translated; it is this translation from which I have worked. However, I have been careful to leave in the author's first-hand experiences and the views and attitudes of others – warts and all. His writing (wonderfully politically incorrect by today's

standards) covers the social, political, intellectual, religious, medical and economic aspects of wartime life under the Kaiser in vivid detail. His views remain as he wrote them in the early 1960s.

It is hoped that this book will give the reader a further insight into the prevailing politics and zeitgeist and life from the 'enemy' side of the First World War. It has been rewritten to commemorate one hundred years since that awful war started.

Michael Stephen Westman
Skye
October 2013

Part I
(1914)

If, therefore, war should ever come between these two countries, which Heaven forbid it will not, I think, be due to irresistible natural laws, it will be due to the want of human wisdom.

Andrew Bonar Law, speech to the House of Commons, November 1911

The events of 1914

28 June	Assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his Archduchess in Sarajevo.
30 July	Russia mobilizes.
1 August	Germany declares war on Russia; France and Germany mobilize.
2 August	Germany demands that Belgium give free passage for her troops.
3 August	Germany declares war on France.
4 August	Britain issues ultimatum to Germany over Belgium. War declared at midnight.
11 August	General Joffre invades Alsace with six divisions. Mulhouse taken but then recovered by the Germans.
14 August	French cross Alsatian frontier aiming to attack the Germans from the south. Six days later, the French

	armies are driven back towards the frontier by Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria's troops.
September	The 'Race to the Sea': Allied troops race north and German troops wheel via Belgium, striving to outflank each other.
10 October	Fall of Antwerp, releasing more German divisions (many volunteers are under the statutory military age) to concentrate their forces near Lille. Rupprecht's troops are brought up from Lorraine.
12 October	British advance between La Bassée and Armentières is beaten back by Rupprecht's infantry. However, great losses inflicted on the Germans.
20 October	The Battle of Yser: the Germans attack across a line from the coastal town of Nieuport to the La Bassée canal.
30 October	The First Battle of Ypres – the 'Massacre of the Innocents'. Great losses sustained by both sides.
11 November	German offensive at Menin Road.
December	Joffre attacks in Artois and Champagne without success.Trench warfare starts.

Chapter 1

‘If War Should Ever Come’

The bells of Berlin had rung in the New Year of 1914. Together with some friends, the Westmann family celebrated this event at home on the Kufürstendamm and toasted in the New Year with the traditional ‘*Prosit Neujahr*’. Everyone was happy and the atmosphere was carefree. We set off some fireworks, told the customary New Year jokes and let loose little tin mice which glided across the floor and under the long skirts of the shrieking *Fräuleins*.

According to another old German tradition, shortly after midnight each of us melted a small piece of lead in an old spoon over a flame. The liquid lead was then quickly poured into a basin of cold water where it immediately formed all kinds of figures resembling ships, people, wild beasts and fantastic mythical creations. Out of these weird shapes we tried to foretell the future and my grandmother Dora was considered an expert in this mystical art. She frowned and predicted tempests and a series of grave events. We did not believe her. On the contrary, we were convinced that the New Year was bound to be happy and prosperous.

Germany under Kaiser Wilhelm II was a hive of activity. The economic boom which had developed after the Franco-Prussian war of 1870 1 had continued and the upward trend in commerce and industry were reflected in a prosperity which pervaded all classes. The enterprising spirit of the middle and upper classes brought them wealth and comfort and the workers seemed content, protected against exploitation by powerful trades unions, a raft of social reforms and legislation passed by the *Reichstag* [Parliament].

Everyone was well fed and well clad. Slums hardly existed, though working class accommodation was generally small. Most people lived in flats, which were generally kept spotlessly clean and well-furnished. Later, as a young doctor, I had ample opportunity to visit these homes

and often had to stay in them overnight on domiciliary visits to women giving birth.

Unemployment and illiteracy were virtually non-existent. Certainly, there were political parties in the *Reichstag* with differing aims, aspirations and divergent views but the Kaiser's social and political activity had removed any real threat of class war. The administration appeared to be corruption-free. In 1883 Chancellor Bismarck had created the National Health Insurance programme and this was almost thirty years before Lloyd George visited Germany to study and to use it as a blueprint for the British Health Insurance Scheme.

In all, the Germans on New Year's Day in 1914 comprised an affluent society and had good reason to be satisfied with their lot. The arts and sciences flourished and Germany was a world leader in my chosen profession of medicine. The ordinary German man went quietly about his business. After a hard day's work he and his wife went to his local pub to meet with friends and to drink traditional *Berliner Weiße* or white beer. The slightly sour taste of this naturally cloudy, low-alcohol wheat beer was offset by a dash of raspberry syrup. Served in large flat-bottomed glasses, this refreshing and delicious drink was the social lubricant of the day!

On Sundays in the summertime my father would take us to a coffee garden at one of the many lovely lakes near to Berlin. Mother would bring a large bag full of homemade cakes and pre-ground coffee. At the counter of the coffee house boiling water would be provided and a charge made depending on the number of cups and saucers allocated. The net result was . . . *gemütlichkeit*, for which probably the closest English translation would be a feeling of wellbeing, similar to that experienced in a British pub or French *bistro* or *estaminet*.

What about religion? Well, put simply, we were not a religious family. Certainly we were Jewish by descent though we did not speak Yiddish, let alone Hebrew. In 1914, long before the rise of the Nazis and the name Hitler became known and reviled, people in Berlin worshipped their own God in their own particular way. Churches and synagogues coexisted side by side and anti-semitism was not an issue.

Germany had been at peace for forty-four years since the 1870 war against the French. Following their victory, the Germans demanded from the French restitutions identical to those Napoleon had imposed on

Germany in 1806. In fact, my great-great-grandfather had been forced to give up heirlooms including his gold watch to help pay for this. In 1871 France had to cede her provinces of Alsace-Lorraine, though it must be said that Alsace was typically German. Maps of the area showing historical developments confirm this point. As a young student in Freiburg I often went hiking in the Vosges mountains. I slept in inns and farmhouses where nobody spoke a word of French. Instead they spoke a German dialect similar to the Swiss-German one can hear in Basle. Indeed, the town of Mülhausen belonged to Switzerland for centuries.

Ethnologically, the people of Alsace originate from a German tribe, the Allemans. To this day, the French word for Germans is (*les) Allemands* and for Germany, *Allemagne.* However, after the humiliating defeat of the boastful Napoleon III in 1871, the French became so consumed with hatred for the Germans and the idea of *revanche* [revenge] – 'Never speak of it, always think of it' that in Paris on the Place de la Concorde they draped a veil of black material around a female statue representing Strasbourg! At that time, Strasbourg was a typically German town, which personally I knew very well indeed.

Britain had fought a costly war against the Boers only sixteen or so years earlier. The Russians had attacked the Japanese and sustained a bloody defeat. France herself had waged one colonial campaign after another in Cochin China [S.E. Asia] or North Africa. True, there were comparatively few French soldiers involved, as the armies consisted mostly of foreign legionaries, amongst them many German, British, Spanish and God-knows-which nationalities!

Germany had been at peace, and so we slipped merrily into the New Year of 1914. On the morning of 1 January my father went with us on that public holiday to the Kaiser's palace and to the Armoury in Unter den Linden. Here we saw the Kaiser resplendent in his uniform, complete with plumed helmet. He was accompanied by his six sons and son-in-law, Ernest of Brunswick, the Duke of Cumberland. They were all at the War Museum at the Armoury to receive the New Year congratulations of each army unit.

The Kaiser's motto was the old Latin proverb, *Quis desiderat pacem, praeparet bellum:* 'He who desires peace prepares for war.' The Kaiser was actually called the 'Prince of Peace'. One must bear in mind that

his *Reich* had two very strong neighbours, i.e. Russia and revenge-seeking France, whose combined armies numbered three million soldiers, at least double that of Germany.

Germany had developed a highly efficient and rapidly expanding industry for which she needed raw materials and export markets. Furthermore, Germany's population had also grown enormously, reaching sixty-five million. She wanted to expand by means of colonialism but was late on the scene to achieve this aim. By contrast, Britain's population was only thirty-eight million but she had a vast colonial empire; Italy had secured Tripolitania, and France, Belgium and Portugal (all of whose populations were declining) tried to enlarge their possessions in Algeria, the Congo and East and West Africa.

Friction developed, leading to the Entente Cordiale between France, Russia and Britain, with Italy and to some extent Belgium as benevolent and not-quite-disinterested bystanders. All of them were jealous of their respective spheres of interest and tried to bar the way to any newcomer wishing to have a slice of the riches of the colonial world. All they conceded to Germany was a few stretches of land in Africa. Most of this was desert, scrub or bushland. This, I think, was the view of the ordinary peace-loving German. It is not for me to decide whether it was right or wrong as I am not an historian. However, at that time I was a student interested in politics and foreign affairs in particular.

Kaiser Wilhelm predicted that the British would use their superior sea power to impose and enforce a blockade on Germany. The French and Russian navies were also looking threatening. On a visit to Swinemünde on the Baltic Sea, I saw for myself a number of large, menacing-looking Russian warships. With this in mind, the Kaiser's efforts to build a navy to be at least a match for the British battle fleet seemed justifiable to the man in the street in Berlin.

Berliners enjoyed watching the big parades on the Tempelhof Field (later to become Berlin Airport). It was a popular sight to see the Kaiser on horseback under a solitary poplar tree, reviewing his troops. Afterwards, the soldiers marched through the streets and down Unter den Linden to the Kaiser's palace. He, like a demigod in the uniform of the *Garde du Corps*, wearing a silver helmet crowned with the Prussian eagle, rode in front of the standard-bearers of the Berlin garrison. Behind him, the massed brass bands of the regiment of the *Garde* were led by a

giant African prince carrying the so-called *Schellenbaum*, an emblem similar to that of the Roman legions and adorned with little bells and horsehair plumes. Then followed the battalions of the footguards, some with high silver helmets dating back to the time of Frederick I of Prussia at the end of the seventeenth century.

Bringing up the rear were the cavalry in their splendour. The Cuirassiers wore white uniforms and helmets which rather resembled those of the British Household Cavalry. Behind them rode the Uhlans with their lances and small black and white flags and then the Hussars in red or green dolmans. Near to the pavement rode a horseman in the black uniform of the 'Death's Head Hussars', not shy about waving to any pretty girls in the crowd! This was the Crown Prince, 'Little Willie' as he was often called.

The people lined the streets and cried 'Hurrah'. The Kaiser saluted them with his field marshal's baton whilst he held the reins of his horse with his left hand, hiding his short and withered left arm. In his entourage were many foreign high-ranking officers: Russians, French, British, Italians and even Japanese, in the full splendour of their national uniforms.

I often discussed with my father (a left-wing liberal) the reason why Wilhelm staged such extravagant military spectacles. Surely he was not interested in merely playing 'toy' soldiers; this would have been an extremely expensive business and the *Reichstag* certainly would have vetoed such a waste of money. My father, who was partly of farming stock, explained the position as he saw it: Germany was like a man who owned rich grazing land with hardly any protection from his aggressive neighbours, whom he knew to be jealous and hostile. They were itching for the right moment to jump over his low fences, burn his house and steal his cattle. What could he do to safeguard his property? Most likely he would keep fierce dogs to bite and drive off any trespassers or intruders. He would also fix a large 'Beware of the Dogs' sign on his gate and would even let his acquisitive neighbours see his fierce German sheepdogs for themselves.

Wilhelm was no fool and neither was he suffering from paranoia. He knew exactly what was brewing in the minds of the vengeful French. They had already made several successful insurgencies in the past but had got a good hiding in 1870.

Russia had concentrated huge armies on Germany's eastern borders. She was ruled by a despotic autocrat or Tsar (from the Latin *Caesar,* as is the word Kaiser), entirely dominated by a bellicose, militaristic clique including the mad monk Rasputin. Obviously it was difficult to defend the wide, open plains of eastern Germany against the Russian 'steamroller', and the Cossacks had watered their horses in the Spree, Berlin's river, not so very long ago. Small wonder that the farmers and landowners of these parts of Germany, the Junkers as they were called, pressed for more troops and stronger fortifications for their protection.

Several of my uncles and cousins who lived there and visited us complained that for scores of miles there was not a single army unit and that the Russians would have an almost unopposed walk into the heart of Germany. When war really did break out, they had to flee for their lives, leaving their homesteads to marauding Russian hordes, who promptly plundered them and burnt them down. As it turned out, it was only incredibly bad Russian generalship which saved Berlin, my home town, not two hundred miles from the Russo-Polish frontier.

Britain, on the other hand, was safe and had nothing to fear. Surrounded by the sea, her splendid navy was ready to repel any potential aggressor. Her army comprised some 130,000 men – all professional soldiers, though the bulk of these were stationed overseas, mostly in India. Her traditional policy was to watch with Argus eyes over the so-called balance of power in Europe. According to British perceptions, nobody should be allowed to have clear-cut hegemony over other nations and thus become a challenge to her. Britannia ruled the waves and everything connected, such as her colonies and foreign markets. The leading exponent of this strategy was Britain's King Edward VII, who saw a potential competitor in his nephew, i.e. Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany.

Here it might be appropriate to take a closer look at the British King and the German Kaiser as *we* saw them from my family's perspective. My father had close business connections with Britain. He had lived there and visited about twice yearly. He told us of the many stories which had circulated of the scandals and love affairs of the then Prince of Wales. The already ageing Prince was forbidden by his mother Queen Victoria from taking part in top-level politics because she did not trust his sense of responsibility or discretion. So his main occupation was that

of playboy and this at a time when his elegant, good-looking and intelligent nephew Wilhelm had, at the age of twenty-nine, ascended the throne of one of the mightiest powers in the world.

Wilhelm had been reigning for almost thirteen years when Edward took the British throne. Under Wilhelm's rule, Germany had made unprecedented progress in trade, industry, science and the arts. Her population had grown to over sixty million in comparison to Britain's thirty-eight and France's thirty-six million. No wonder the British King saw his nephew as a rival whom he envied and reviled – consciously or not.

Like his uncle Edward, Wilhelm was half German and half British. Edward's father was Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha. Wilhelm's mother was the eldest daughter of the British Queen, Victoria, and, indeed, 'William' was the favourite grandson of the Grand Old Lady. Needlesss to say, Wilhelm spoke perfect English and had both German and British tutors, who initiated him into the intricacies and advantages of the British parliamentary system and the constitutional law of Germany. Bonn was his university. He hated his British mother, who mistreated him psychologically. Incompetent obstetricians had injured his left arm at birth and ignorant surgeons were unable to correct this. His mother often called him a cripple in the presence of other people. Therefore, quite understandably, he developed an inferiority complex for which later he overcompensated by a kind of hauteur which many misinterpreted as arrogance.

On the other hand, he adored his extremely handsome father, Crown Prince Frederick, whose political leanings were towards left-wing liberalism. However, in 1887 the Crown Prince lost his voice and the Regius Professor of Surgery at the University of Berlin, von Bergmann, diagnosed a malignant tumour and wanted to operate at once. The Crown Princess, however, insisted on consulting the British throat surgeon Sir Morell Mackenzie, who declared the growth to be benign and advised against an operation. Barely ten months later, Frederick III, as he had by then become, was dead after a reign of only ninety-nine days. His father Wilhelm I had lived to the ripe old age of ninety-one, and now the twenty-nine-year-old Wilhelm II had to ascend the throne of Germany.

His social policy brought him into conflict with the ultra-conservative

Chancellor Bismarck, and he decided to drop the old pilot from the bridge and take the wheel of the ship of state into his own hands. One must not forget how different the German monarchy was to the British. Whereas in Britain the monarchy has to be impartial and above party politics, in Germany the crowned head really ruled.

Germany was a federal state, comprising twenty-five members under the supreme control of a Federal Council or *Reichsrat*, with Prussia in a majority. Her king also had the title of German Kaiser though not of Kaiser of Germany. He had the power to declare war, but aggressive wars required the consent of the Federal Council. He could sign peace treaties and was the supreme commander of the armed forces. He thus represented the German *Reich* in her relations with other countries, and as such he tried to approach Britain and conclude a treaty of friendship with her and Russia.

However, here his antagonist Edward VII crossed his path and prevented Wilhelm's idea of a great Continental Federation to include Russia and bring about an alleviation of Franco-German tensions which threatened war. Britain's King travelled hither and yon attending conferences in Biarritz, Homburg, Paris and elsewhere, and all of this in addition to his other 'activities'. Finally, he succeeded in concluding alliances with France in 1904 and Russia in 1907.

The British public strongly disapproved of this strategy, regarding France as corrupt and as Britain's traditional foe. The Liberal Government under Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman had been in office since December 1905. It did not have the nerve to inform the country, Parliament or even some Cabinet ministers that talks had already started between the French and the British general staffs. The entente with Russia was equally unpopular, largely on account of the Tsarist tyranny.

'Uncle Eddie', as we called King Edward, also came to Berlin in 1909, and together with other schoolchildren I had to line Berlin's Unter den Linden boulevard. Each of us was given a little Union Jack to wave and we had to stand in icy cold weather in the gaps between the columns of Prussian footguards. Big fires were lit to keep everyone warm. Eventually, the open landau drawn by six horses and carrying the two monarchs appeared in the centre arch of the Brandenburg Gate, preceded and followed by the Sovereign's escort of the Garde du Corps.

The rotund Edward was in the full military uniform of a German