The
PATTERN
Of
HISTORY
And fate of humanity

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Eventually every empire meets the conflict it most fears – its own collapse. Today humanity stands on the brink of another world war, the apocalypse it strives to avert: the one it is destined to realize. Governments are not heeding the warning of history, doomed to pull their peoples over the precipice.

All wars are fought over power. But power is an illusion: it does not last, and cannot be possessed forever. Leaders and policy-makers do not see this. They believe power is necessary, because of what they think it promises.

Power, manifested as interest and present in every conflict of history, cuts across all apparently unifying principles: family, kin, nation, religion, ideology, politics – everything. We unite with the enemies of our principles because that is what serves our interests. We turn against our own for the same reason. The struggle for power is the cause of war.

When core interests are at risk a state can find itself in peril, with no alternative to war: any course means defeat, hence the need for self-deception that a positive outcome can – will – be achieved. It deludes itself that the fateful conflict can be prevented, limited in scale or most hubristic of all – won.

The book explores the historic pattern to this cataclysmic crisis, the abyss at which the planet teeters, and offers an answer condensed into the very final word.

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It came as an epiphany, one of darkness not light, a chill cloud crossing the sun – a dissonance, a disharmony.

War was threatening in Kosovo, and Russian Prime Minister Primakov turned back mid-flight when he heard diplomacy had ceased and combat about to commence. In that moment I realized history had not changed – certainly not ended – and life seemed immediately darker and colder. In that instant the unbroken pattern of history was clear.

Having fought two world wars in one century, and stood on the brink of a third, it was apparent that the final dreaded apocalyptic conflict had only been postponed. Humanity, however indolently, was moving blindly towards nuclear Armageddon. Immediately evident: nations were appearing to act in the same pattern that had led to the Great War in 1914, which as a consequence resulted in the conflagration of 1939. Yet no politician or academic saw this: I certainly heard or read nothing warning of where history was leading. The common perception that an age of lasting peace had dawned was false, only a matter of time before that illusion would be shattered, and the conflagration so long feared – that all were now convinced was no longer a threat – would visit itself upon humanity.

The preceding decade of conflict in the Balkans had the thread of history through it. People see their own myths and selective facts in the histories they read. This much they all share. Historic narratives promise that denouement the history-tellers want. But during this time I was also looking back and seeing the future from the standpoint of

my present: seeing history as how it gave me contentment and meaning. But in that moment of epiphany the illusion was swept away, there was no reason for contentment and all seemed despairingly meaningless. Once I had seen the pattern of history there was no peace in looking back. I had to know the answer why. I had to go back. It would take another seven years of study and reflection before I would write down *The Pattern of History*, under a rising barley moon.

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From 2000 I was also writing to politicians and activists, former prime ministers and academics with mixed results. Peace seemed too secure, the past too horrendous to contemplate it returning. I raised the matter at public meetings of peace groups. I argued that this new era more resembled pre-1914 than post-1991, that war cries of an axis of evil were dangerous, not at that stage aware 'angels' and 'devils' can make common cause: and that the one cause was always power. After a few years I put my activities aside, despondent no one was listening. There was a cycle nobody was prepared to recognize: so no one would be able to break. And as a consequence the outcome would be inevitable: nuclear war. Starting where or when was impossible to predict.

I will outline my conclusions before explaining how I arrived at them – the journey back.

All wars are fought over power. Manifested as interest, power has been present in every conflict in history and is the true motivation of rivals. It cuts across all apparently unifying principles: family, kin, nation, religion, ideology, politics – everything. We unite with the enemies of our principles, because that is what serves our interests.

We turn against our own for the same reason. It is power, not any of the above concepts, that is the cause of war. It has eventually brought every empire/civilization, however great or exceptional it thought itself, to its own demise. Every great nation faces that cataclysmic fate: that configuration of events that leads inescapably to the conflagration it seeks to prevent. All great powers eventually get the war they are trying to avoid. During the Cold War rival superpowers sought to prevent World War Three, and succeeded. But today the nuclear states are blind: do not see where they are stumbling, do not see the abyss before them. They still need to avoid World War Three, but do not see, and so are doomed to fight it.

But leaders and policy-makers delude themselves that fateful conflict can be averted, limited in scale or most hubristic of all – won. When core interests are at risk a state can find itself in peril, with no alternative to war: any course means defeat, hence the need for delusion that victory can – will – be achieved. That has always been the case, and the mentality persists. No solution is possible if its foundation is illusory. Facts as well as myths can create this self-deception. They are chosen selectively when they fit pre-conceived notions, biases, to conform to the desired narrative. The truth lies in the pattern of history. That pattern points to another world war, nuclear holocaust, the conflagration all nations dread: the one they will get. If anyone thinks it can be prevented uncomfortable truths as to human motives have to be accepted.

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Now – the journey back.

Commentators said history, if not ended, had clearly

transformed into something indomitably better and permanent. The Cold War was over, the old order gone, but well-placed individuals of the old order made the best of the new. Power was slipping from the centre. The leaderships of the dying republics became rulers of their own fiefdoms.

A cordon sanitaire was lost, welcomed by many in those lands, but a future crisis in the making for rivals. It appeared from the rapture that ideals had won, victory always destined for superior values. While the victor always sees the matter settled, the vanquished sees defeat as only temporary. The present lacks proper perspective on the past, allowing the viewers see what they want and not what is really there. The Cold War era was seen as a struggle between good and evil, the two superpowers eye-balling each other, a wrong move and civilization would be destroyed. They fought by proxy, coming close – but not too close. Skilfully they avoided the planet's annihilation. Diplomatically they signed treaties so not to plunge humanity into destruction. Still, either would use its weapons of mass destruction if circumstance demanded. And the other would reply. Both sides morally justified genocide and crimes against humanity: and all still do.

In the fading days of the Cold War presidents Reagan and Gorbachev met in Reykjavik, a summit that led to the elimination of a whole class of nuclear missiles from Europe. Reagan insisted he did not want nuclear war, saying the 'Evil Empire' was another era and was keen to win the trust of the Russian people and leadership. Gorbachev wanted peace because of the futility of self-destruction. And economically crippled by the arms race, he knew his government needed to reform to retain power. It appeared the world was on the path to peace.

Several years before that the world appeared to stand on the brink of self-annihilation. To many, operation Able Archer was ominous. Troop movements in the West were seen as a cover for pre-emptive attack on Eastern Europe. The build-up to Able Archer was a period of increasing tension. The exercise came and went – no war. The Kremlin had hinted that the deployment of new warheads could not be tolerated, creating an imbalance too dangerous to Russia's vital interests. It appeared the prospects were not as stark as the picture conjured up by the rhetoric.

The philosophical dichotomy between the blocs was posed as the reason either side would go to war with the other, destroy each other if need be. But those stark differences were not so rigid. In the midst, ideological brethren Russia and China split over ostensibly doctrinal issues. Chinese ruler Mao Zedong would ally his country with the capitalist United States: similarity or difference does not determine where interest lies.

Misjudgement or accident could have pushed the nuclear rivals into the abyss. But defending strategic interests was not going to: because ultimately both could compromise, accommodate. Or one could: so the other could. In the crisis of the early sixties America faced Soviet missiles on Cuban soil, a historic existential threat fused with modern apocalyptic vision. Khrushchev had the freedom to back down, the conditions that nihilistically force nations to war not fulfilled. And so any earlier miscalculations, misjudgements were harmless. He would roar and thump the table with his shoe – theatrics.

Allies had become enemies, prepared to kill each other's civilian populations in any numbers necessary. Yet many had envisioned the World War Two alliance could

be translated into a peacetime alliance. But the 'Big Three' had their own paths to follow. America had become the dominant global hegemon, with half the world's wealth: the new order would follow that reality. Russia had its buffer zone against Germany; that could not be compromised, for insecurity of the Steppes was uncompromising. Great Britain's empire was now illusory, the sun setting, becoming dependent on its former colony, yet desperate to remain at the table of great powers.

Days before the Second World War ended the nuclear age began with the American destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, heralding in the destructive power to win war: power that could not be contained. Soon Russia had its nuclear bomb, followed by Britain and France striving to maintain some global status, in time followed by many others. So easy brutal victory was denied, mutual annihilation ensured. Luckily, conditions preventing the weapons' use were already there. All claimed the stockpiles were in defence of ideals.

The peace of 1945 more resembled the past than a new future. Diplomacy was still about power, even if the term balance-of-power had lost favour. The Grand Alliance had carved out the spheres of influence, percentages scribbled on a piece of paper. The new institutions of peace would in time prove to be like previous ones. Defeated Germany was ruled by the Allied Control Council – the United States, Britain, France and Russia– all separate political entities and interests. Stalin wanted deep reparations to reconstruct his country, the motherland ravaged by the war. He was enraged by moves to end reparations and Russia's exclusion from a share of the German industrial heartland, the Ruhr. French President, General de Gaulle, wanted to prevent anymore German

invasions of his country, and regain his nation's colonial status. He recalled his mother's account, how she cried on hearing the news of capitulation at Sedan. He wanted Germany permanently subdued. Bringing Germany into a western military alliance was to prevent it embarking on its own national, military adventures once again. New reality forced new allegiances. The growing power struggle between White House and Kremlin led to a standoff, with respective clients falling into line, two military blocs in frozen confrontation, that if ending in war no one would win; default, a balance of power, holding the peace until circumstanced changed, irrevocably.

The Second World War created that reality.

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During his final days in the bunker, beneath the ruins of Berlin, looking up at the portrait of his hero Frederick the Great, Hitler still saw inspiration for the Aryan dream, myth of the super race, that he too could turn events around like the Prussian king had done at Rossbach and Leuthen, even taking some desperate comfort in the stars. He saw in the detail of that painting what he wanted to. Delusion can be cruel: the boy from Austria sent to unite the German peoples. In Vienna he had been the lice-infested down-and-out trying to sell his paintings, a solitary figure in a long overcoat given to him by a kind Jew. Through all this Hitler had hatred to drive him, a coming global conflagration to embitter him further and create the circumstance that would look like destiny unfolding before him. And it is easy to find providence in reason, whatever shallow language or imagery used. It is hard for those in power to accept themselves as being at the whim of

chance: the cabinet-maker's assassination plot and the random luck of leaving a little early; easier just to dismiss any doubt and find arguments for the preordained – racial superiority. But it still took power to realize the perverse goal, killing whoever in whatever numbers to achieve it. While much reduced in stature and vigour the Fuhrer could still spew volcanic rage, ranting of bringing all down with him: even the German people, destroying what might sustain them through the dark days of defeat.

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A meeting in the White Mountains planned out a New World Order, where the gold-backed dollar would replace the British Sterling, reflecting America's status as chief global hegemon. As the war came to an end Britain was bankrupt and forced to end the trade preferences it had given itself in its colonies and dominions.

America was now the world's largest creditor, holding four-fifths of the planet's gold, and wanted its currency enthroned as the global monetary standard. And the dollar stood as the only credible surrogate for gold. But Britain was now facing bankruptcy, its imperial power gone, having no choice but cede to Washington's terms and accept the Greenback as the alpha currency. For it had entered a Faustian pact to get US financial aid in its European war with Germany. In return Britain had to give up the privileged status it held in its former empire, that position now held by America. Its economic might had been growing steadily since the mid nineteenth century.

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In December 1941 two distinct global conflicts conflated

into one: Europe and Asia, when Japan bombed Pearl Harbour. With this President Roosevelt brought the US into the Second World War. Churchill had been desperate for America to join the fighting. Hitler was already in command of Europe, with his armies pushing at speed into Russia. Up to that point financial support had been given – but no troops – and at a very high price, and a joint-declaration portending the death of the British Empire. The United Kingdom came to win the war with the support of the two rising superpowers. Yet it also lost that war because it lost what it had sought to keep, its global dominance.

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Late August 1939 the ideological arch rivals, Nazi Germany and Marxist USSR, signed a non-aggression pact in Moscow. Hitler was secure his invasion of Poland, only a week later on September 1, would not draw Russia into the war, only Britain and France to contend with if they chose to fight. Stalin sensibly put aside the narrative that capitalist powers would greedily tear each other to pieces to the advantage of socialism. For months his government negotiated with Britain and France, but he suspected they were plotting for a Soviet-German war: them the victors. At that stage neither side could see where their true interests lay, all that mattered. Within two summers it would be clear, and old negotiations re-entered. The pact with Berlin gave Stalin a bulwark against attack, eastern Poland and the Baltic states. Fear of being drawn into a wider European conflict persuaded Russia and Finland to end their Winter War that had followed the great carve up.

At Munich Chamberlain sought to prevent conflagration. Accused by historians of appeasement he

knew Britain was not ready to fight in autumn1938. Czechoslovakia was pressurized to cede the predominantly German territory of Sudetenland, assured Hitler had no further territorial ambitions on the country. But Hitler did: he wanted to re-unite all the German peoples, a pan-Germanic dream. Peace deals are the postponement of war when power and interests are at stake. The Anschluss had already brought Austria into the family fold. All of Czechoslovakia was to follow the absorption of the Sudetenland. Hitler still gambled on getting more concessions by peaceful aggression, avoiding full-scale war. But Poland would be the step too far.

Benito Mussolini was initially hostile towards German designs on Austria, war alliance between the two countries not yet fated, and even threatened war. German ambitions encroached on those of Italy, which Hitler was aware of. So-much-so that he supplied arms to the Abyssinians in their war with Italy, to keep Rome bogged down in East Africa while he pursued union between Germany and Austria. Finally, Mussolini would have to enter the Pact of Steel. He wanted an empire of his own – a new Rome – and would come to conclude that Germany was the rising European power to ensure that dream. The Italian dictator would align where he saw such a move served the interest of power. He had forgone any arrangement with France or Britain. But the egregious anti-clericalist willingly helped Franco defeat the Republicans, who the Spanish general saw as servants of the Antichrist. Apparent contradictions make perfect sense when the true motive – power – is acknowledged.

Adolf Hitler came to power offering the Herrenvolk myth and that the source of all Germany's problems – the Jews – would be resolved. The German super-race would

expand eastwards to find new living space, driving out the inferior races. The humiliation of Versailles would be avenged. He saw the Nazis as the descendants of the mythical pure-blood Aryans, successors of the Teutonic Knights, Holy Roman Empire, Frederick the Great and Bismarck. The Third Reich, like ancient Rome, would rule for a thousand years he predicted. Tellingly Hitler killed off many rivals to his personal power, loyal acolytes to his cause.

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In the late 1920s Briand and Kellogg called for the renunciation of war, and sixty four nations signed up – a noble cause. Nonetheless, ideals were always kept in check by the powers: nothing that did not serve their own interests. The proposal was never written into the League of Nations' rule book. The requirement of unanimity guaranteed the larger states could not be mandated to do something that undermined their power.

Germany was allowed to join the League when Berlin promised to recognize the Franco-German frontier in the Treaty of Locarno. The western borders were left unchanged. In the east the borders were open to revision: Britain hoped that France would renounce its eastern allies, Poland and Czechoslovakia, who would then have to give in to German pressure for territories it laid claim to.

There were forebodings at Rapallo too, where Berlin and Moscow signed their economic treaty. Russia, once France's essential counterweight to Germany, was isolated after the 1917 Revolution. It feared an alliance of the Four Powers – Great Britain, France, Italy and Germany – that could result in a new war of intervention, memories of their own civil war still fresh in the mind,

with the west motivated to get its debts repaid. The Bolshevik leaders were new to power, and power was what they wanted to hold on to. That and not world revolution would determine their foreign policy. The treaty was an example of where ideological enemies become the most natural allies. Logic told the two nations that was the course to take. Germany was being crushed by the terms of Versailles. Co-operation was in its best interest as well.

It was hoped the Treaty of Versailles would be the dawn of a new world order, that the Great War had been the 'war to end wars'. President Wilson's Fourteen Point Plan would see the creation of the League of Nations, to resolve disputes between states. But the US would return again to isolationism, having been drawn into the conflict by Germany's attempt to open a new front on the Mexican border. As always, behind the grand ambitions for peace lay the secret tussle for power. France could not accept anything less than total victory, unforgiving reparations: Germany could never accept defeat as final, yet had no choice but sign.

On 11th November 1918 at the eleventh hour the guns had fallen silent across Europe, the armistice signed on a train carriage in the bare mist-clad winter forest of Compiegne. Germany would immediately abandon the lands west of the Rhine and agree to a neutral zone on the east bank, and its army and navy slashed; too punitive for Germany, not punitive enough for France.

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The last Habsburg monarch of Austria, Charles I, spent the remainder of his life on the island of Madeira, deep in the Atlantic, banished there by the Allies. Like Napoleon Bonaparte he attempted to win back power, albeit in a

feebler fashion, so an island surrounded by ocean seemed the most appropriate prison. The dual monarchy collapsed before the end of the war it had started to prevent that very outcome. And Charles I was dethroned and banished. Not accepting this loss of power he attempted to regain the crown, encouraged by Hungarian royalists, but resisted by his former prime minister and now regent of the new republic in Budapest, Miklos Horthy, saying the allied occupiers would not accept his return.

Resentment against the war had been growing for some years because of food shortages, leading to strikes and mutinies. The different nationalities were seeing their opportunity: the opportunity the Hapsburg dynasty hoped would be neutralized by launching war in 1914. By 1917 they feared they might go the same way as their sworn enemies, the Romanovs of imperial Russia. Reform was introduced. Austria would be transformed into a federal union: German, Czech, South Slav and Ukrainian. But these national councils quickly became national governments, declaring full independence, realizing Vienna no longer had the power to dictate terms. The monarchy dissolved at the end of October 1918. A year before that it made secret overtures for a peace deal, to the fury of Germany, apparently prepared to abandon their old racial ally in the hope of self-preservation.

The German people rose up in rebellion at the end of the war. Humiliating defeat and the hardship of a British naval blockade forced them out on to the streets. The army and navy mutinied. The revolutionaries were baying for the Kaiser’s blood. In the dying hours of his empire he realized he would have to abdicate, but hoped to retain the title: King of Prussia. That was not to be. In the dark of night he fled to the Netherlands followed by an emperor’s caravan

but leaving behind an empire of soil. The Dutch gave him sanctuary, allowing him to live and die there peacefully, escaping the victors' noose. British premier, David Lloyd George, strongly held the view that the Hohenzollern should swing.

The Kaiser's Russian cousin was not so lucky in his bid to escape retribution. Revolution had exposed Tsar Nicholas as powerless to issue dictates. In Petrograd the symbolic double eagle was ripped down from public buildings. It was thought the royal family might go into exile. But no nation would offer asylum, not even the tsar's two entente allies. King George V of Great Britain feared the presence of his first-cousin might provoke a similar anti-royal uprising in the United Kingdom. While Paris was sensitive to increasing unrest on the Western front, and the presence of the ex-tsar might aggravate matters. The matter was resolved by the family's execution: the tsar, his wife Empress Alexandra and children Olga, Maria, Anastasia, Tatiana and son Alexie whom he held in his arms. They were shot and bayoneted, their corpses thrown down a disused mineshaft.

Mehmed VI, last sultan of the Ottoman Empire, with the territories already carved up between Britain and France, was exiled by the nationalist government in Istanbul. Inheritor of the Sword of Osman, he departed the lavish Dolmabace Palace with only his personal possessions, choosing to leave behind jewels and other valuables.

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In 1914 four of the major protagonists got the war they were seeking to avoid: their own collapse. The multi-ethnic Austria-Hungarian Empire faced existential threat from the

looming prospect of a Greater Serbia. So it made another ultimatum, this time seeking justice for the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, desperate the approach would work again. Vienna initiated war to avert the very war it sought to prevent – but got – desperate confidence born out of hopelessness. Germany, facing war with continental rivals France and Russia, initially supported the Habsburgs in a 'localized war' against Serbia. Victory against the Russian-backed Serbs would reduce the length of frontier Germany would have to fight on. But even the most ingenious of plans to secure against war can instead give assistance to the dynamic forces leading towards it. Kaiser Wilhelm II convinced himself major European war could be avoided. He and his cousin, Tsar Nicholas II of Russia, kept in close contact in the summer month leading to the outbreak of World War I to this aim. But St Petersburg had its own vital interests to protect. It was apprehensive about growing German influence in south eastern Europe, especially the Straits at Constantinople, through which so much Russian exports passed. Without that passage to the Mediterranean Russia would be strangled. Germany could not be allowed to cut off that oxygen supply. It could not be allowed the opportunity: the Romanov dynasty had to go to war. The Ottoman Empire stood aloof for a while, before joining with Germany out of a greater fear of Russia.

Many European leaders in the 19th century feared collapse of the Ottoman Empire would result in Big Power conflagration in the region, into chaos that presented both opportunity and risk, but most of all – uncertainty. But the Turkoman empire's fall followed the conflagration not preceded it. The Russian Romanovs were overthrown by revolution before World War I ended, the Hohenzollerns

and Habsburgs not long after. Of the victors – France, Britain and America – the first reversed the humiliation of 1870, the second maintained its global dominance and the third stepped on the battlefield as the new behemoth to challenge them all.

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The path from 1871 to 1914 was well signposted as to where the journey was destined. Each crisis came and went: each time optimists believed the next one would disappear too. There was a resistance, or blindness, to the reality that events were leading towards a conflict among the Great Powers. By 1914 the armies of Europe were quietly building up for that war most in authority thought would be short but violent. None could see the future, how long it would last and how far reaching the consequences would be for those dynasties fighting for the very things they would lose – power and life.

In June 1913 the Second Balkan War came to an end, the victors of the first fighting over the spoils of the first and Serbia making substantial territorial gains in yet another brief conflict, still occupying parts of Albania, a threat too far for Vienna: an ultimatum was given, they had to vacate the territories within eight days. The tactic worked. But the Belgrade leadership was confident it was on the road to a Greater Serbia, uniting all the Slavic peoples in the region, including the Southern Slavs under the rule of the Austrian Hungarian Empire. It had been feared that the First Balkan War would become a major conflict, when the Balkan League – Bulgaria, Serbia, Greece and Montenegro – rose up against the Turks, ignoring the pleas of Vienna and St Petersburg. The two, while rivals, found common cause to avoid escalation. And

while Russia did not want to offend the Slavic population in the geostrategic region, wary of the pan-Slavic movement at home, there was ultimately only one reason the country would go to war: the Straits. Although Habsburg rulers were determined to stop the tide of nationalism, catastrophic for its multi-ethnic empire, it wished to avoid a war that might draw in the Bear. But it could not countenance Serbian access to the Adriatic, which could ultimately result in a Russian naval presence: a real existential threat.

British Chancellor, David Lloyd George, passionately pronounced that peace was too high a price to pay when Britain's vital interests were at stake, showing that the things that unite peoples are not as strong as what divides them: the struggle for power. Pro-German on grounds of religion, philosophy, art and culture the Welsh Liberal showed that interests reflected what's really important. The country would support France following its intervention in Morocco. The arrival of German gunboat, *Panther,* in a show of naval prowess against French colonialism, could not be allowed to pass. Britain still had its rivalries with Russia, but Germany was now seen as the greatest danger to the United Kingdom's global standing. The crisis ended without bloodshed. Germany chose peace, having wrung out some colonial concessions, as had been its aim. War between the powers in North Africa proved unnecessary.

In 1905 Kaiser Wilhelm II took up the cause of Moroccan independence, lending support to the sovereignty of Sultan Abdelaziz, arriving in Tangiers on his royal yacht in a show of pomp and circumstance. Germany felt excluded from commercial opportunities in Morocco by the way Britain and France had divided out

the spoils of imperialism between them, nullifying the independence promised to the sultanate in 1880. German Chancellor, Count Bernard Von Bulow, threatened war. France, while perceiving its interests challenged, found no need to go to war. And there was no war: Germany got commercial concessions, the crisis receded.

Théophile Delcassé desired closer ties between Britain and France in the latter's struggle with Germany to reverse a humiliating quarter century. Negotiations led the two nations to settle their colonial rivalries: French supremacy over Morocco and British supremacy over Egypt, and the signing of the Entente Cordiale in 1904. France had been isolated from other European powers by the diplomatic manoeuvrings of Bismarck. Britain had been pursuing its policy of Splendid Isolation, avoiding permanent alliances, only intervening when core national interests were threatened. And while the entente was not an alliance, legally, it was a symptom of the dangerous state of Europe, an omen even. Events were bringing these old foes, on-and-off at war for almost a thousand years, to an understanding more important than any previous differences. All the stated reasons they had gone to war in the past now conveniently discarded. Britannia and Marianne now danced in harmony. Then, the differences on which peoples place such importance are not what form partnerships: only interests do that. France wanted to avenge its defeat in the Franco-Prussian War and loss of territory, nakedly humiliated by the stripping of its power. Delcassé had first approached the issue tactfully, rebuffed by Berlin, his mood turned to hatred.

The United Kingdom was feeling isolated, in need of a partner on the continent, becoming increasingly unsettled by the rise of Germany and its aim of naval and

imperial ambition. The German empire's industrial production was outstripping Britain's. So too was the United States'.

In the last year of the 1800s the first Hague Convention was held, called by Tsar Nicholas II, arms reduction would be a much-needed economic relief as his vast empire was facing social unrest. His cousin, Kaiser Wilhelm, attended but thought the proceedings a joke, preferring to trust in his 'sharp sword' and God. Britain signed but would not accept any restrictions on its forces. Masking real motives, agreement was reached. It outlawed chemical weapons and the dropping of bombs from balloons or other means of flight, but did not stop the drift to global conflict.

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At the end of the 19th century the West continued its war on the vile slave trade. Yet all was subject to the demands of interest. General Kitchener led a force into Sudan against slavery and to avenge the death of Gordon, but also to safeguard the Suez Canal and prevent rival imperial powers moving into the region; selfish motive always present. Modern technology in rifle, machine gun and artillery meant inequality in death: shells raining down, making shrapnel of red dust and rock, or burst in the air, slashing their victims from above. Those not dead were left to die or helped along the way. It was said the skull of the deceased Mahdi was turned into a drinking vessel by General Kitchener. Fourteen years before, the victory at Tel-el-Kebir saw Britain in total control of Egypt and securing the strategic Suez Canal as well as British bondholders, in the foreign policy pursued by the Liberal, Prime Minister William Ewart Gladstone. It showed how

principles can change in response to the economic needs of policy.

There was no contradiction when the secular, pluralist Third Republic entered into alliance with autocratic Romanov Russia. It helped France escape its isolation and now had an ally against Germany. Russia was pleased: it gave a freer hand against Austria-Hungary, believing Germany would be too stretched to lend support to Vienna. The new alliance would give it opportunity to develop projects such as the Trans-Siberian Railway, thus extending control right across the vast eastern territories as far as the Pacific. French financiers were eager to sell Russian bonds to the French middle class, which would contribute to eventual world war. Not even a brilliant statesman like Bismarck could foresee every eventuality and its significance for the future after he had left office: while chancellor he banned the sale of Russian bonds on the Berlin Stock Exchange in retaliation for Russia imposing taxes on foreign owners of estates in Russia. This affected German aristocrats with estates on Russian territory. Russia turned to Paris in search of funds. And when Constantinople closed the Straits in its war with Italy Russian grain could not be exported and the loss of revenue put pressure on Moscow's debt to its French lenders, the bitter irony: their allies actually pushed them towards war in 1914. The Straits had always been their lifeline.

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Chancellor Bismarck's stewardship of the German Empire came to an end in 1890 after his rancorous disputes with the kaiser. The former chancellor lived several more years. On his deathbed he warned that Prussia faced another Jena:

the first humiliating battle coming two decades after the admired Frederick the Great, and another catastrophe would follow his passing.

It would have been impossible for Bismarck's schemes to succeed. Building the empire, then maintaining it, in itself created the instability that would destroy it. For every empire eventually gets the war it is desperate to avoid, however skilful the political masters. His successor as chancellor was convinced that Germany and Britain were natural allies, and in time London would come to see this, that they would never go to war against each other. But Britain was to move closer to France and Russia.

Bismarck needed friendly relations with Russia, wary of the danger of having to fight on two fronts at the one time, and keen to appease Russia for his alliance with Austria. So he signed a secret alliance with the tsar, so secretive even Vienna wasn't informed, all aimed to stop the emergence of a Franco-Russian alliance. It gave Russia freedom of movement in the Dardanelles and Bosporus. But the consequences would ultimately be the conflagration Bismarck had worked to prevent. Bismarck became conscious of the need to bandage France's wounded pride and supported Paris over its colonial expansion into North Africa, bringing it into dispute with Italy over Tunis. Germany stood to gain from French foreign policy turning away from the Rhine and towards the Mediterranean. Yet Germany would still draw Italy into alliance with Berlin and Vienna – the Triple Alliance. Italy would strengthen Germany's southern and western flanks in a two-front war with France and Russia, should such arise. Italy, angry at France, was quick to join the old enemy, Austria-Hungary, in alliance because that was where its interests lay. Mutual suspicions between the two

‘allies’ were to persist, and Rome was quick to point out the defensive nature of the alliance in 1914 when Germany and Austria-Hungary took the offensive in starting the Great War.

War might have been inevitable, but the final configuration of ally and foe was less than certain: a neutral Germany in a war between Russia and Britain and Russia to stay out of a conflict between Germany and France, while respecting the integrity of Austria-Hungary as long as it did not extend its influence in the Balkans – an impossibility.

Bismarck proclaimed the Dual Alliance of 1879 as the ‘organic link’ between Austria and the rest of Germany. Austria had played its strongest hand: gaining a formal alliance, which it needed to supplement an Anglo-Austrian alliance against Russia. Germany would have to step into the breach to defend Austria-Hungary: Britain would not have to; Germany would be fighting Westminster’s battles for it.

The aim of the Congress of Berlin, chaired by Bismarck, was to reverse gains made by Russia in the Treaty of San Stefano some months earlier. The European press hailed the congress as a huge success, but in reality it changed little. Most participants were dissatisfied, a dissatisfaction that festered. The route to world war was being mapped out. Yet if it had not been that road it would have been another. It is the destination that is significant; it is the desire for power that fates the destination. Bismarck wanted to keep Russia and Austria as allies but his effort for balance tilted too far towards the Habsburgs. It was a tightrope he could never walk, certain to fall. Strenuous efforts to avoid war can be the very cause of war. Austria was seen as a winner, gaining considerable territory that

further embittered the Slavs of the region. Ultimately everyone gets the war they are trying to avoid.

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When King Wilhelm I of Prussia was proclaimed Emperor of the new German Empire in the Hall of Mirrors, Palace of Versailles outside Paris, Bismarck must have felt satisfied the spectre of Bonapartist France was finally exorcised for exactly the same price. The date, 18 January 1871, was auspicious: 170 years to the day that Frederick I was crowned King of Prussia. And the humiliation of 1806 had finally been buried, yet would still have to be stopped rising again from the grave.

Victory was swift for the troops of the North German Confederation, ending with Emperor Napoleon III, nephew of Napoleon Bonaparte, ordering the raising of the white flag over the Fortress of Sedan and offering his ceremonial sword to the conquering Bismarck. He did receive a sovereign's imprisonment at Schloss Wilhelmshöhe: eventually released without an empire, a kingdom or a country. His own populism finally robbed him of the means to avoid the conflict that portended his doom, his calls for a congress of Great Powers drowned out in the raucous clamour for war. He feared the fate of Charles X and Louis-Phillippe: he feared the rise of Prussia. The menace was compared to the 16th century when France felt encircled by the Habsburg dynasty.

Napoleon III espoused the national interest above all else. But national interest and personal interest are often hard to distinguish. He sought a new alliance with Britain and was even prepared to reverse the terms that ended the Crimean War. But the interests of his old ally, and his old enemy, were not served by his diplomatic manoeuvrings.

His dream had been to undo the settlement of 1815 and destroy the Concert of Europe that had held France in check. He wanted a new empire, a Bonapartist dynasty stretching from Mexico to Asia. When a young boy of seven his uncle lifted him up to view the troops outside the Tuileries Palace in Paris. The last time he saw his uncle was when the first emperor led his forces to that final battle at Waterloo. Eventually Louis Napoleon got the very same result he dedicated his life, and his dynastic honour, to avenging.

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Bismarck suspected France might attempt to overturn Prussia's victory at Koniggrätz, its interests compromised by the sweeping military and political successes. The long struggle between Austria and Prussia over who would dominate the Germanic peoples was at an end, but the repercussions unseen. Being driven out of Italy and the German family the Habsburgs turned their imperial attentions elsewhere – the Balkans. In Prussia victory brought jubilation. Bismarck was mobbed by supporters in the streets of Berlin. Nothing inspires patriotism more – right across political divide – than military success. It is always claimed to be something more than just raw power. Power is loved less than its opposite, powerlessness, is hated.

Events had moved swiftly. Only four years prior, in 1862, Bismarck had been appointed minister-president, the first step to defeating Austria. His initial military, diplomatic triumph was in the Schleswig-Holstein succession dispute with Denmark. Ostensibly allied with Austria, in all appearance harmonious, the new minister so favoured by the Prussian monarch secretly aimed to annex

the two duchies fearing they might become satellites for Habsburg machinations.

Otto Von Bismarck was born in the year the Napoleonic Wars ended, he grew up on memories of Prussia's humiliation by France. How Prussian military prowess had been emasculated at Jena and Auerstedt, fortress after fortress surrendered feebly to Napoleon's army as it swept through the country, King Frederick William III and his queen, Louise, in flight. Hope that Preussich-Eylau was a change in fortunes was quickly dashed. The armistice between French and Russia emperors left Prussia as a rump state. The Prussian king could only stand by and watch as greater powers decided the future of his land. Further degraded, Frederick William had to send his wife to Napoleon and beg for more lenient terms. While impressed by the grace and determination of this young woman the emperor would not make a single concession. Gone the image Prussia was a major continental power, now humbled in abject defeat.

Bismarck sought the glory-days of Frederick the Great, preferred narrative to the one written by the Napoleonic Wars: hated state of defeat. Internally and externally his aim would be power, domestically playing conservative and liberal one against the other. Internationally there would be no enemy or foe, only alliance to serve Prussian security. France would be the ultimate dragon to slay. He would have to bring together all the strength he could.

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By the 1860s, just across the English Channel, Britain had become the greatest imperial power on the planet. A constitutional monarchy, liberal democracy, by 1833 it had

abolished slavery throughout its vast empire. Its Navy interdicted vessels on the high seas that were suspected of transporting human cargo. But there is a contradiction or compromise in politics over the ideal. Now the English Prime Minister, Lord Palmerston, was an abolitionist yet supported the Confederate South in the American Civil War. Dissolution of the Union would weaken the United States, and enhance British power. The Southern Confederacy was a valuable market for British manufactures and source of cotton for its textile industry. His reforming foreign secretary, Sir John Russell, also anti-slavery and committed reformer privately had some sympathies with the Confederacy. Yet Russell was a strong force in maintaining British neutrality in the conflict. The cabinet did not want to be forced to take sides. Siding with the South could lead to hostilities with the North: an embargo on essential grain supplies, a threat of invasion of Canada and even attacks on British maritime interests worldwide. Choosing the North on principled grounds would have been choosing to support an ambiguous attitude to manumission among the Union side. Some of Lincoln's generals, while dedicated to fight for the Union, did not support the emancipation of slaves. When all was stripped away the dispute was more about power, system of governance over ideals. Maintaining the Union was the first objective, abolition of slavery the second.

Westminster was concerned about developments on the continent, particularly the 'Eastern Question'. In the early 1850s Britain allied with France against Russia, the first major crack in the Concert maintaining the balance of power in Europe. British Foreign Secretary, Lord Palmerston, viewed the French with suspicion but it was Russia that more pressingly threatened the United

Kingdom's interests, its gradual encroachment on the Dardanelle and Bosporus Straits. The alliance gave Louis Napoleon of France the first opportunity to unravel the diplomatic system that was supposed to prevent war among the great powers. Paris – like all other capitals – was ultimately touting for its own national interests, interests so often hidden beneath other emotive and irrelevant issues: Russia's demands to exercise protection of Orthodox subjects of the sultan or rivalry between Orthodox and Roman Catholic over keys to the holy sites in Palestine. The Turks stood firm against Russia, backed by their new Anglo-French backers. After three years of bloody fighting the protagonists came to the peace table, Russia giving in with Austria's threat to take sides against it – bitter recrimination stored up for the future.

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In the year the Crimean War ended rebellion broke out in British India. Feudal lords who had lost titles and domains due to the Doctrine of Lapse, which interfered in the traditional customs of inheritance, seized the opportunity of events. Nana Saheb, peshwa of the Maratha Empire, led the revolt in Kanpur which resulted in a massacre of English, men women and children. His grievance: as the adopted son of exiled Maratha peshwa Baji Rao II he was entitled to a pension from the East India Company. After his eventual defeat he fled to the Nepal Hills. The reconquering British enacted the same vengeance on the local population as had been brought down upon them. The rebellion gave Lakshmibai, queen of the Jhansi, the encouragement to rise against the authorities and grow into a symbol of Indian nationalism. What was to come, bloodbath and massacre, followed a similar pattern. In her

final battle she is said to have attacked the enemy on horseback dressed in the sowar uniform of a cavalry officer, crying 'I shall not surrender my Jhansi', before being brought down by a hussar's sabre.

The trappings of power are perceived important – what is visible – yet not as important as power itself. Bahadur Shah Zafar was the last Mughal emperor, but in name only, his power not extending beyond the high walls of the city of Shahjahanbad. He was a noted Urdu poet and Sufi mystic. Because of his neutral views on different religions many considered him acceptable as Emperor of India, to rule over its many kingdoms. He gave backing to the rebellion but in reality the power – or the illusion of it – lay with the sepoys, those soldiers who sparked the rising over new guns greased with animal fats: rumours of tallow derived from beef, offending Hindus, or from pork, offensive to Muslims; ostensible reason for the rebellion.

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The Mughal Empire had grown the very profitable opium for sale within its territories, a trade the British East India Company would take over and turn into a very lucrative export. The corporation had total control and began exporting the drug to China, where it was exchanged for silver. Initially tolerated by the Qing dynasty, the silver provided to the foreign traders was often used to purchase desired Chinese produce such as tea. American merchants also wanted to get in on the market and introduced opium from Turkey into the Chinese market. The increased competition among British and American merchants drove down the price, making it more accessible and so increasing addiction and misery. Authorities tried to curb the trade, but it was profitable to Chinese businesses and

officials as well as foreigners. Opium was eventually banned. Ships were boarded and the merchandise seized. On the beach outside Canton the stockpile was burned: a larger fire would be ignited.

Such actions were decried as efforts to hamper free trade. Debate in the British parliament spoke of Chinese cruelty and despotism, and the pro-Whig press relished the justifications for pursuing interests under the banner of righteousness. Anti-war voices such as later prime minister, William Gladstone, were drowned out. British warships were already on their way to the Far East.

The First Opium War had begun. British naval power would prove decisive in defeating the Chinese. Representatives of the Daoguang Emperor were forced to sign a peace agreement, the Treaty of Nanking, aboard HMS Cornwallis. Called the Unequal Treaty by the Chinese – fixed rate tariffs, extraterritoriality, trade ports and reparations of millions in silver dollars, and the unhindered trade in the opiate that had started it all.

The journey to that point began a century earlier. The bitter taste has remained ever since.

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In the early 19th century Britain was determined to prevent Spain regaining its former colonies in South America, which presented lucrative commercial opportunities, and so sought the support of US President James Monroe. The new American nation was keen to keep old colonial powers out of the Western Hemisphere, considering the Americas its sphere of influence. But its security depended on sufficient naval power, which the US did not possess, so came to rely on the assistance of British Royal Navy warships. The adopted doctrine would bring America into

spheres that had not been anticipated.

Events that led to calling the congress of 1822 in Verona saw France seize its first opportunity towards aggrandizement, small step to overturning the despised surrender terms of Bonaparte's defeat. The Greeks had revolted against Turkish rule with a danger Russia might intervene, ostensibly to support their fellow Orthodox Christians. Tsar Alexander's conservative ally, Austria, was also hostile to any Russian intervention in the region. Prince Metternich was clear: the interests of monarchy and balance-of-power took preference over religious affiliation. Austria called the powers together. Britain, fearing its interests could be in jeopardy, helped avert Russian intervention by getting a commitment from the Turks to introduce reforms. But France's intervention in Spain became the pressing issue. Paris restored the Bourbon King, Ferdinand VII, to the throne after the country had descended into civil war. London had also opposed the assertive action by France, hostile to any possible re-emergence of Spanish influence.

At Aix-la-Chapelle, in the autumn of 1818, France was admitted into the congress system, its hereditary dynastic monarch restored. With the final reparations settled the allies could quickly withdraw their troops from French soil. The issues of the wars from 1792 to 1815 were settled – or so it appeared. The Big Four became Five. The diverging interests of the old Quadruple Alliance, formed three years before, would prevent its members from acting in concert, the original objective – the stated one. Suspicions among the allies ran deep. Nor could the pious title of the Holy Alliance keep its three rulers united in common purpose: returning to a golden age of Christendom.

As 1815 drew to a close the Big Four signed the Quadruple Alliance, pledging to maintain the peace by force, a peace that had been hard won over twenty-three years. Serious differences over territory had been put to bed, to sleep for a while at least. The signatories committed themselves to staying united for another two decades to ensure the peace of Europe, and a civilized system to resolve disputes. Separately, three of the ruling monarchs entered into the Holy Alliance. Neither entity would survive because of the dark reality of power.

When the allies came together on the battlefield once again, at Waterloo to defeat Napoleon for a second and final time, they carried a secret among them. Days before the fateful clash they had signed the Treaty of Vienna. The aim: to stop France re-emerging as a threat to Europe and establish a diplomatic system that would preserve the peace and settle disputes without resorting to war. It came to be known as the Concert of Europe. But it exhibited the symptoms of its own death before it was even born. The map of Europe was to be redrawn and the Bourbon Monarch restored to the throne of France, but the nation escaped heavy reparations or loss of territory and occupation by foreign armies. Generous terms that were reversed when Napoleon relaunched his bid for power. There was a flaw in the unity shown: each of the powers around the table had its own interests to further, or protect, each would side with another accordingly. Britain wished to bring about a peaceful continent where it had profitable trading interests. It also had interests in the east Mediterranean where it saw Russia as a dangerous rival. The Austrian Habsburgs wanted to preserve their dynastic predominance and create a stable balance of power to do this. Russia sought to annex much of Poland to the east and

Prussia wanted to take over its old enemy Saxony. Britain and Austria were united in opposition to any such carve up. Talleyrand offered them French military support against Tsar Alexander I and King Frederick William III. The three nations entered a secret agreement that they would stop any such territorial designs, by war if necessary. All the victorious powers had wanted to keep France out of the decision-making. But the wily Talleyrand was able to insinuate himself in the negotiations – France's interest.

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As the smoke of battle drifted over the corn fields a gloomy pall crossed the setting sun. Napoleon was whisked away from the remnants of his defeat. The royal carriage raced back towards Paris, the cavalry of the Imperial Guard covering the retreat. Napoleon had committed his elite troops, having been so reluctant to put them into battle, like superstitiously grasping a sacred talisman to the chest. But the Prussians were now hard on his heels. And they nearly caught him when the coach became stuck in a throng of fleeing soldiers. Bonaparte escaped by horse leaving behind his sword and hat, symbolic mementos of victory that were sent to the Prussian General Blucher. Bonaparte made it back to Paris. The mood there was against him: he abdicated a second time. This time exiled to the Isle of St Helena, to reflect with incomprehension how Waterloo had ended in defeat for the few years he had left. The reality of final defeat left him no imagination to create imaginary empires, and no means – or luck – to make them come true.

Only months before Waterloo, on Elba, developments at the Congress of Vienna were reported back to him: divisions among the former allies –

opportunity for him. He had not given up hope of return, power regained. No military genius passes up the opportunity that chance offers. With his troops he escaped the island prison and landed in France. In his military coach that carried him through so many glorious campaigns he made for Paris. Many joined his cause on the journey, including Marshal Ney, who had at first called for him to be captured and brought back in a cage. The restored Bourbon monarch, Louis XVIII, had fled. On retaking his throne Napoleon resumed his task of preparing for war. The fields of Waterloo were beckoning, where all would be decided, but Napoleon was convinced everything was already fated.

His Russia Campaign had left his empire mortally wounded, and the pack would smell the blood. At the Battle of the Nations it would devour him, and many once loyal to him would eye some of the scraps that could be snatched from this eating frenzy. Metaphors aside, the defeated emperor would be treated with some honour, and dignity. The small island of Elba off the Italian coast would be his 'kingdom'. A contingent of devoted soldiers would accompany him. He would be allowed much of his possessions, including his prized military carriage.

The last moments were filled with pathos and symbolism. So bitter the sense of betrayal no existing word encapsulated it, but to create another synonym, befitting the times. Napoleon was about to depart for Elba, exiled upon his defeat and abdication. But first he would kiss the standard of the Imperial Crown, blue white and red tricolour embroidered in gold, with its majestic eagles. The standard had led his brave and loyal soldiers into many battles – the troops standing around their emperor still loyal – for power can seep down from power, like

raindrops over leaves. But glory is not invincible or immortal, no outward grandeur can alter that.

The Imperial Senate announced a provisional government and the restoration of the Bourbons, without any reference to the ‘emperor’, as quickly the tricolour was replaced with the white cockade. Talleyrand, the political realist, chairman of the senate, became first President of the Provisional Government, because realpolitik allows people to retain what power they can. And the marshals abandoned their supreme commander, for devotion is conditional on continued glorious victory. The last marshal to leave his side was James MacDonald, Duke of Taranto, from an exiled Scottish Jacobite family. And Napoleon offered him, in the symbol of friendship, the ceremonial sword of Murad Bey.

From the walls of the Kremlin Napoleon had watched fires break out across the suburbs: victory would not be his. The flames coalesced into conflagration until the wooden buildings of Moscow were incinerated. The pungent clouds whirled around him, sparks danced through the night sky and flames lapped against the high walls of the citadel. Napoleon had been surprised no dignitaries were there to meet him when he arrived at Moscow, no one to hand over the keys, as would be a common reception for a conquering army. The city was mostly deserted. The only booty would be the ashes blowing across the charred remains as the autumn turned towards winter. Napoleon realized there was no other option but retreat, back the way he came, to the banks of the River Niemen, on a hopeful bright summer day in June as he launched his campaign. For the Franco-Russian alliance had fallen apart.

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After Friedland, Tsar Alexander was forced to seek an armistice with Napoleon. The emperor and the tsar met on a raft with a splendid pavilion, built on Napoleon's orders, moored in the middle of the River Niemen near the east Prussian town of Tilsit, neutral ground on water forever in motion. Russian and French faced each other on opposite banks. Frederick William stood on the water's edge, in his own land, but uninvited in negotiations that would affect his kingdom. Russian and French flags fluttered everywhere. The pavilion was adorned with garlands and wreaths bearing the letters A and N – FW nowhere to be seen. Prussia's status as a European power was no more. Even the intercession of Queen Louise could change nothing, the pattern of history, history repeating itself. The negotiations resulted in a Franco-Russian alliance, giving the two empires mastery of mainland Europe, with a secret clause they each would come to the aid of the other if attacked by a third party. Russia joined Napoleon's continental system in opposition to the British Empire. The tsar was allied with the Antichrist, as he had described Napoleon, with the religious fervour of good versus evil. But it was harsh reality that would make the alliance: harsh reality that would break it.

Jena was the humiliating defeat that would be seared into the collective mind of Prussia – the stripping of national pride, left vulnerable and weak. It offered battle to Napoleon without a major ally on the field to support it. Seventeen years before, its rulers had seen the French Revolution as an opportunity not a threat: everything had changed. France was devouring more German states, while in the east the Russian Bear still growled menacingly. Seeking to avoid war with either, secret diplomacy and

manoeuvrings found the nation simultaneously allied with both. King Frederick William III suffered open provocation by Napoleon, goaded into action by the inescapable circumstances, insisting that the terms of Basle be honoured. In his reply, the French emperor dismissed Frederick William as merely a puppet of his counsellors. War with France was now inevitable. Some of the king's government wanted alliance with France, others Russia. Now it was Russia. But Tsar Alexander's army was not yet ready to fight. Prussia was on its own, no major ally to meet the *Grande Armée*.

Prussian military prowess had declined since the Seven Years' War, and was no match for swift and fleetly actions of the enemy soldier empowered by victory and pride. Its commanders had expected to engage in the Thuringian Forest to the west. But wars can be won or lost on failure to anticipate: Prussia didn't expect Napoleon to move as quickly as he did, outflanking them and cutting off their supply line. The battle of Jena followed, fate decided. Berlin was quickly taken by the conquering force and the Prussian king fled east with the state treasures in toe. On arriving in the capital Bonaparte paid a visit to the tomb of Frederick the Great, and stood pensively in the burial chamber of the ruler he so much admired doubting he would have won if this was twenty years earlier. He had studied Frederick's campaign accounts as if trying to decipher the secret of eternal victory. Meanwhile, the ousted Prussian king compared his country's plight to the dark days of the Thirty Years' War.

Earlier Prussia began to lose enthusiasm for war against revolutionary France, turning its attentions east to Poland. There King Stanislaw August declared independence and introduced a new constitution. Russia

and Prussia both saw this as a threat. Catherine the Great sent a large army into the kingdom, and Berlin agreed to partition in an effort to limit the extent of Russian annexation, also fearing a strong independent Poland. Partition followed. The land buffer between Prussia and its larger eastern neighbour disappeared as well. Austria also entered the fray, keen for a slice of the territorial cake being cut. As this was going on Berlin signed a 'peace' with France – the Treaty of Basle – withdrawing from that conflict, allowing it to concentrate on interests in northern Germany while Austria was kept tied down by France. Prussia was exhibiting a dangerous policy of abandoning allies.

The Declaration of Pillnitz by Austria and Prussia, putting aside their rivalry, called for the restoration of King Louis XVI as monarch with full powers. Initially an attempt to pressurize Paris, it would become a full military alliance aiming to overthrow the revolutionary government of France. At first Prussia welcomed the French Revolution: fall of the *ancien regime* also promised the demise of the Franco-Austrian alliance against the Hohenzollerns.

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At Austerlitz Napoleon decisively defeated France's historic foe, the Hapsburgs. Now emperor, wearing the crowns of both Rome and Aachen, it seemed nothing could stop him. He said the battle was the finest he had ever fought. Future military strategists would look back on the campaign and believe they could learn from it. Napoleon was easefully ascending to the zenith of his power: from the peak the view is of an open plain stretching as far as the eye could see – to flames on the skyline. The Holy

Roman Emperor, Francis II, was forced to sign an armistice. His ancient title would not outlive him. The monarch who was powerless to stop his aunt being guillotined by French revolutionaries had to give his daughter in marriage to the greatest beneficiary of that same revolution. With the creation of the Confederation of the Rhineland, a bulwark for France, the Holy Roman Empire ceased to be, but the seeds of a new powerful identity had been sown.

On Christmas Eve 1800 Napoleon, now the First Consul of France, was attending the opera in Paris. As his carriage approached the venue a cart laden with gunpowder was ignited. He escaped uninjured. But the royalist assassination attempt presented an opportunity: with power your enemy can come from all sides. Napoleon blamed Jacobins, contrary to advice from his chief of police Fouché, but he had his own plot in mind, for he had conspired with Talleyrand to overthrow Bonaparte. Jacobins were exiled or executed. Those going to the guillotine protested their innocence, that they had confessed under torture, but to no avail. Their deaths suited their once-fervent Jacobin ally: all opposition had to be removed. And his rise seemed unstoppable, supported by a nation fearful of anarchy.

Bonaparte's war in Egypt followed on from his first campaign in Italy. The aim of invading the Ottoman Empire was to protect French trading interests in the region, much in the inspiration of Baron de Tott, throwing down the colonial gauntlet to England with the eye on distant Mysore in India, and to walk in the footsteps of Alexander the Great. He would be victorious on land: but he would be vanquished on the sea, with Horatio Nelson's resounding success at the Battle of the Nile, giving Britain

strategic naval advantage in the East Mediterranean for the rest of the war. The French general had quickly taken Alexandria, then Cairo. In sight of the pyramids on the desert's horizon his army met a fierce army of Mamelukes. But victory on the shifting sands would be Bonaparte's. And he was full of dreams. He could forgivably dream: of ruling an empire in the Middle East, forming a new world religion, in his hand a new Koran. But Nelson's victory shook him awake. The naval defeat left him and his army stranded. Eventually he would escape back to France, leaving much of his army behind, but brought the dream with him.

Napoleon Bonaparte, a young Corsican artillery officer, was given command of the Italian Campaign – his debut as a general in the French revolutionary army. Victory for the military genius, already warily noted for his ambition, was swift. Sardinia-Piedmont was dramatically defeated, where earlier attempts under different commands had failed. He could turn his attention to its ally, Austria. Victory at Fombio and Lodi quickly followed. Soon the general would control the fertile plains of northern Italy, promising his soldiers glory, honour and riches. He set the terms of the Treaty of Campo Formio, ominously without consulting his political masters in Paris.

It is reassuring to think humanity is on a steady course to a destination defined and mapped out, without the pitfalls of chance. But chance has its part, especially when people don't want it to, convincing themselves when they have some power – an illusion – they can master everything and tame randomness. And follows the savage struggle, without parameters, to hold on to power. Otherwise, all that remains is reality.

The Directory was replaced by a consulate: that by

an empire. The five-member committee had fought wars, required defeated cities and states to pay France huge amounts of gold and art treasures. In this climate Napoleon found his opportunity: order out of chaos. That promise had its attraction to the insecure. He was winning glory on the battlefield, for himself. The worst excesses of Terror had been removed, but the economy was in tatters, allowing the Jacobins to reassert some power, and measures against them returned to the old cycle. Bonaparte, commanding the Army of the Interior, set about crushing any rising – any future opposition. And Babeuf would die, a man accused of bloodthirsty righteousness in pursuit of power to put limits on power, taking as his model the Gracchus brothers of ancient Rome.

The Directory had taken over from the Thermidorian Convention, which came to power in reaction to earlier excesses, what it would call the Reign of Terror. The convention inflicted upon the perpetrators of the Reign of Terror what would come to be known as the White Terror. The campaign called for revenge on the Jacobins for their atrocities: atrocities were committed against them.

Victory at Fleurus meant the death of Robespierre. Defeat of the Austrians ought to have brought an easing of the Terror: it only increased it. Desperate to stay in power – to stay alive – it eventually cost him his life. He could not let go of control. His enemies were emboldened to action because failure to move would mean certain doom. And so Robespierre was deposed and sent to the guillotine.

The war was turning in France's favour. But the revolutionary war was driven by the need to survive rather than to spread revolution. The government's chief military strategist, Lazare Carnot, had warned that the country

needed to extract food and other vital materials from neighbouring territories if the revolution were to succeed. The revolutionary army brought back grain and cattle, fodder for their horses, as well as huge quantities of wine and gold coins: promising plenty in place of famine.

Danton, Robespierre's one-time ally and friend, began to criticize what he saw as the regime's excesses. He became a threat to Robespierre. Danton and his followers were tried on vague anti-revolutionary charges of treason and corruption. Robespierre's confrontation with Danton and his supporters was couched in moral language, that the group was riddled with corruption. The environment had produced the conditions for enrichment. But it had also produced calls for a relaxation of the Terror, that measures were going too far. Whatever the reason – whatever the truth – Danton and his associates had to go: that it sustained Robespierre's grip on power was the only clear truth. Defence of power was the common denominator when condemning political opponents to death.

Robespierre was silencing opposition voices, shutting down the independent debating clubs and cutting links with the sans-culottes who had brought him to power. The revolutionary and journalist, Herbert, and his supporters were dispatched with extreme cruelty for accusing Robespierre and the Jacobins of being too moderate. More were being despatched to the guillotine, any semblance of a fair trial discarded. The accused lost the right to put forward any defence against the charges.

He justified the Terror as a struggle for the life and soul of the revolution: it was increasingly apparent it was a life and death struggle for survival. Power not ideas ensures survival, for a while at least. He crushed ideas of right and left, not just despotism and the reactionary forces

of royalism. Robespierre, as a young idealistic lawyer, had once refused the position as a magistrate because it would involve imposing the death penalty.

The execution of the king exposed the naked competition for power. Up until this point the Girondins, to the right and supporters of the free market, were the dominant group in the French parliament. Their rival grouping was the left-wing Montagne, which accused them of being secret royalists and having sought to prevent the guillotining of the monarch. The working class san culottes were growing angry because of inflation and food shortages, having gained the least from revolution.

Robespierre saw their raw anger, and how to harness it for his own needs. Up until this point the new France was the creation of the bourgeoisie: the creators and beneficiaries. Robespierre saw the opportunity of turning events into a class war, a benefit to him in his personal war against Brissot. The poor naturally demanded food: Robespierre promised it. And he showed them the source of the injustice – the Girondins. The san culottes began organizing to take power themselves, drawing up their fourteen demands, including the impeachment of Girondin deputies and voting rights restricted to san culottes alone. The deputies were arrested, quickly guillotined, but leaving real power not with the working class but with Robespierre. He would move against them.

The French Revolution was under way, and would execute its most symbolic act on that July day 1789 in Paris: storming of the Bastille. The prison was the embodiment of royal tyranny. It was over-run, later to be completely demolished. The revolutionaries were drunk with delight, wrote the journalist Francois Mignet. It must have felt like the incarnation of the myth.

Events leading to this had their origins in the debt incurred by Louis XVI for financing the American Revolution, crushing taxation and the whim of Nature sending bad harvests and droughts. Consequences followed. A sovereign lost his head, a reign of terror was unleashed, a kingdom overthrown by middle class demand for power would then be replaced by an empire. That empire would spread to dominate all of Europe before falling, returning the country to the regime-of-old – for a time.

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The Treaty of Paris ended eight years of war between Britain and the American revolutionaries. The rebels had their freedom. During the negotiations they concluded the motive of allies can be as threatening as the motive of enemies: backers Spain and France wanted them to win, but for their benefit not for the new nation's.

The old world monarchies were tyrants, alien to the lofty ideals of Congress's Declaration. These free men would not be enslaved by a king but rule themselves as a republic. Passion for the idea had grown among the leaders since those first shots fired at Lexington on that bright April morning, 1775, following on from the crown authority's reply to the boycott of British goods. But General Gage did more to enflame rebellion than to extinguish it. The rebels were already enraged before the Intolerable Acts were passed and prosecuted.

Of the Townsend Acts the tea tax remained, making merchants switch to smuggled Dutch product instead. But they were by-passed: the British government, through the East India Company, flooded the market with cheap tea, using their own wholesalers. The American

merchants could not compete, many joining the ranks of the rebellious, destroying stock and tar-and-feathering crown officials. Those ranks had been growing over the preceding ten years since the British parliament began increasing taxes on the colonies to defray the financial burden caused by the Seven Years' War. American colonists were left with a sense of injustice: they were English, their rights guaranteed by Magna Carta, free from the chains of tyranny with their own claims to share of power. Yet they had no representation in that parliament across the ocean, voiceless and repressed by its taxes.

They had fought patriotically for king and country against France in that conflict, North America a major theatre of competition. Many colonists saw a string of British defeats and humiliation, only finally culminating in a hollow triumph. They would be better defending themselves than leaving it to the Red Coats. Perhaps that was a case of the competitiveness for power that finds no loyalty to commonality in the drive to win.

The colonies had already proved their ability to prosper, all having benefitted from slavery and the 'triangular trade'. Luxury goods were shipped to West Africa, where they were presented to local chiefs and exchanged for human cargo, to be shipped across the Atlantic to work as slaves on the plantations. On the return journey to Europe the ships carried the produce of the forced labour: cotton, sugar, tobacco, Molasses and rum.

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The Seven Years' War came to an end with the Peace of Hubertusburg in 1763. Empress Maria Theresa accepted the pre-war status quo and Frederick the Great agreed to vote for her son, Joseph II, in the next imperial election for

the crown of the Holy Roman Empire. A separate treaty made peace between the other two major belligerents, Britain and France, who had been fighting for global dominance. Both were left financially exhausted after the war, consequentially significant for both. The Bourbons lost their North American colonies. Within a generation they would lose France.

Catherine II became empress of Russia in 1762, near the end of the Seven Years' War. Admirer of Peter the Great she continued his expansion south around the shores of the Black Sea. Her conquests made Russia the dominant power in south eastern Europe, winning beyond the boundaries where Tsar Peter had failed. Victory in the Russo-Turkey War left Ottoman authority seriously weakened. St Petersburg's growth was noted in other European capitals, and its possible effects on the continental balance of power. Catherine now had access to the Black Sea – salt water. The expansion south also had prizes to the west. It increased its hegemonic influence over the Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth, leading to its partition.

Domestically Catherine the Great was influenced by the Enlightenment. As ruler she introduced many reforms. But the French Revolution changed her outlook, when royalist heads began falling into the basket. Power of the enlightened despot could not be challenged, authority could never be traded. Expansion is glorified with triumphalism. But it is the only course when the alternative is extinction. Fear must have gripped Catherine's belly with the vision of the guillotine or being caged like a captured bear.

In 1756 the Prussian king saw the dangerous alliance building against him so decided to act first,

launching the Seven Years' War. In late summer his troops invaded the Electorate of Saxony, which he suspected – wrongly – was in the coalition against him. The French and Austrian reaction was to move closer in military opposition to Prussia, with an annual cost to Louis XV of 12 million livres until the war was won. Russia joined the fray, its eye on territorial gain to the west. Sweden enlisted in the anti-Prussian alliance, desiring to take back Pomerania. The situation for the Hohenzollern ruler looked bleak. But geography and disparate objectives among the enemy would charge to his assistance. Serendipitously, the change of ruler in Russia brought in a tsar keen to make peace with Berlin.

The conflict came about after the Diplomatic Revolution, when the entire alliance system did a summersault in the hopeless aim of maintaining the balance of power in Europe and, increasingly, globally. Britain switched allegiance from Austria to Prussia, concluding the Habsburgs were not strong enough to check France. So Austria realigned with old foe France, seeking its neutrality in any Austro-Prussian war over Silesia. While France, because of its growing conflict with England over the North American colonies, became amenable to the new arrangement with Austria.

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The new twenty-eight year old king launched his surprise attack across the Silesian border, into the crownlands of the Austrian Habsburg Empire, but which his own Brandenburg-Prussia dynasty had partial claims over. Not the snow-covered winter nights, or Austrian troops garrisoned in the province, could stop this daring attack – without formal declaration of war: perhaps reckless but

still successful. He needed to move quickly for the security of his kingdom: his rival Augustus III, King of Poland and Elector of Saxony, also had interests in acquiring the strategic and mineral-rich lands. But the Habsburgs were much depleted after the setbacks of the War of the Polish Succession and the Turkish War just concluded, and unable to reverse the occupation; though long they would try.

Frederick II of Prussia, later Frederick the Great, came to the throne of the small German kingdom in 1740. It was a weak and insecure state. He could only dream that by the end of his reign it would be a major European state: to see its ultimate fate would make him shudder with the fear that seeks out self-deception and power. The new sovereign would describe himself (and by logical extension the land he ruled) as a traveller on the road 'who sees himself surrounded by a bunch of rogues, who are planning to murder him and divide up the spoils among themselves'.

On his deathbed, his father reportedly pointed to Frederick and said: 'There is the man who will avenge me.' The enemy to be avenged was Austria, for its betrayal of Prussia. He warned him that the House of Austria could not be trusted. It would seek to humiliate and dominate Prussia. Father and son had been estranged for some years, but they shared the dream for Prussia. This seemed a source of healing, and he would do his father proud. Frederick William I was embittered that the Catholic emperor, of whom he had been largely supportive, failed to support his claim to the Rhenish Duchy of Berg. Vienna had promised the dukedom as a quid pro quo for Berlin supporting the Pragmatic Sanction, which would break with tradition and allow a Habsburg daughter to inherit the throne.

A brutal father, although war-wary sovereign, Frederick William I left his son a huge well-trained army that would help him fulfil that task. So different in personality: the king was a strict Calvinist, the son a modern man of the Enlightenment. Yet the crown prince once on the throne would lead the family dynasty into a series of wars, to its glory – and Prussia's – about power not enlightenment. On Austria's part, it had come to regret supporting Prussia receiving a royal crown half a century earlier. It began a policy of containing any further consolidation of the Hohenzollerns in Germany. While they were allies in the War of the Spanish Succession, rivalries were already developing between them.

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Peter the Great was always embittered that he had to sue for peace, losing Azov and the Black Sea, not compensated by his victory over Sweden in the Great Northern War. Charles XII's dream of reducing Russia to a mass of tiny principalities had been shattered. Instead Russia gained the Swedish Empire's Baltic territories, making it an important European power. But, as often, it is the danger of fighting war on two fronts. In the campaign on the Pruth the emperor came near to being captured: the image in his mind – a prisoner in a cage like a captured bear paraded through the streets of Constantinople. Concession was the only option, even if a bitter poison. Although it left a sweet taste for the England Levant Company. It saw Russian expansion as a threat to its commercial interests in the region.

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With little gained but crippling cost the factions made their peace at the small Dutch town of Ryswick in October 1697. The Nine Years' War between France and the Grand Alliance of England, Spain, Austria and the Dutch Republic was concluded – or suspended – for the question of who would inherit the Spanish throne when the childless and terminally ill, Charles II, finally died had not be settled. A rest rather than a peace: all sides were exhausted, commerce destroyed and famine stalked the land, harvests failed and winter storms froze the fields.

The agreed truce showed that King Louis XIV of France no longer had the power to impose his will on Europe. He entered the conflict without allies. The war started with the victory of the Holy League over the Ottomans in the Great Turkish War. He watched Habsburg's success and the implications for French interests, the janissary driven away from the walls of Vienna. And once Austria had settled its disputes it would turn attention back to France. For that reason the Sun King had lent support to Mustafa II. Louis was also alarmed by the Glorious Revolution across the narrow English Channel. At Westminster parliament had overthrown Catholic King James II and replaced him with William III of Orange, the Stadholder of the Dutch republic. France was being encircled by a threatening coalition, an alliance that wanted French borders reversed to the lines agreed at the Treaty of Nijmegen.

William's invasion was primarily to stop an Anglo-French alliance, as in the Franco-Dutch war – his greatest fear. He had not wanted James to fall under the influence of Louis XIV. In that aim the stadholder championed the support of the Holy Roman Emperor, Leopold I, and the

papacy. France had a long history of hostility with the Habsburgs as well as with many pontiffs. Louis was at the time in a bitter dispute with Pope Innocent XI, about the power of the absolutist monarch over the primacy of the Church.

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That Franco-Dutch conflict spun a web of wars. At Nijmegen the cobwebs were swept away. Bourbon Louis XIV had territorial designs on Spanish Netherlands and the Rhine, in the continuing dynastic rivalry with the Habsburgs, and largely achieved those objectives at the peace signed in Nijmegen. Emperor Leopold I intervened in support of the Dutch when France invaded. England allied with France, having longstanding commercial and maritime disputes with its Dutch neighbours. King Charles II of England also received financial support from the Court of Louis, which he hoped could make him more independent of his parliament. A slice of the lucrative Dutch spice trade would also help fill the royal coffers, even more power to the crown. But the alliance would not last the length of the war. Opposition at home eventually forced Charles to make peace after two years of naval combat.

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Lord Protector Cromwell assisted France in winning the Franco-Spanish War, after a treaty signed between the Puritan ruler of England and Catholic Cardinal Mazarin, advisor to King Louis XIV. At the Battle of the Dunes in 1658 Commonwealth troops fought alongside royalist French Catholics to defeat the Spanish, which England was

also concurrently at war with over competing commercial and colonial interests. While both Catholic regimes were anathema to Cromwell interest determined England had to ally with one – France. A treaty with the Bourbons blocked exiled Charles II from launching a French-backed invasion to return the Stuarts to the English throne. But the French regime's greatest threat was its co-religionists, why the protectorate's support was welcome. In response, Charles switched his allegiance to Philip IV of Spain.

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In October 1651 the English Parliament passed the first Navigation Act, aimed at displacing the Netherlands as Europe's dominant trading nation. The consequence was increased piracy on the high seas and naval skirmishes, resulting in open war. Inconclusive, the two sides were forced to the negotiating table. England had failed to replace the Dutch as ruler of the waves, mercantile supremacy had not yet been achieved. But in a secret clause to the treaty, the English republic, ruled by a king in all but name, got an assurance that the four year old William III of Orange would never rule the country as Stadtholder, for the family had links with the Stuart dynasty who plotted to regain power in England, having been driven into exile after losing the civil war in England. Cromwell himself insisted on the inclusion of the secret annex, feeling the threat so near and real.

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The civil war between the parliamentarians and royalists came to its symbolic conclusion in January 1649. On that cold winter day, the deposed king was beheaded, accused

and sentenced to death for tyranny and attempting to 'overthrow the rights and liberties of the people.'

The first pitch-battle took place at Edgehill in October 1642, while indecisive both sides claimed victory. The origins of that ten year conflict went back many decades, to the struggle between the rights of parliament and the rights of the monarch. The issue of tonnage and poundage might seem dull and innocuous, but this tax proposal was considered by parliament as an attack on its rights. Charles I believed in divine right, that his authority came directly from God. In the Commons a different theological viewpoint dominated: that the people of that body got their rights from God to follow their own individual religious conscience. But neither position – conveniently – conflicted with the respective interests: the right of the king to raise taxes for war or the right of parliament to decide what taxes are levied on its members. Interests determined theology: not vice versa, no matter how passionate or genuine the feelings. Even as the new monarch sought to assert his authority, his course had been set a century before by the actions of an earlier king.

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As the Thirty Years' War came to conclusion, but conflict with Habsburgs continued, Louis XIV faced united opposition from his own nobility that erupted into civil war. It was the final attempt by the aristocracy to protect ancient liberties from royal encroachment. Increased taxes to finance the cost of France's wars were rejected by the aristocracy. But the population was exhausted and sought only peace from the anarchy caused by the maelstromic conflicts, a generation that had suffered nothing but strife.

At least the king's party promised order. He had defeated his nobles, introducing an age of monarchical absolutism. But the cost to the nation had not been settled.

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France's overriding interest in the Thirty Years' War was to break out of Habsburg encirclement. That it achieved. Consequently France would become the predominant power – what the Thirty Years' War was about. Cardinal Richelieu's objective had always been to undermine Austrian and Spanish hegemony. Supporting Protestant heretics had never been an obstacle to French foreign policy. In the final stages of that long, bloody war France got drawn more directly into the fighting. Bolstering Sweden would prevent Ferdinand diverting troops to assist Spain. A peace between the main protagonists would free imperial troops for that purpose. A peace to the strategic disadvantage of France would necessitate open war. So King Louis XIII declared war on Spain. It would be another thirteen years before the final peace would be signed: and Habsburg hegemony replaced by Bourbon hegemony.

The ailing Emperor, Ferdinand, capitalized on his victory against the Swedes at Nordlingen, entering into negotiations. Brokered by Saxony the result was the Peace of Prague. But Ferdinand had to compromise on his previous edict regarding Church lands, though his core goal was achieved: excluding Protestantism from Habsburg hereditary lands.

When King Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden entered the conflict he was depicted in contemporary pamphlets as the saviour of Protestantism. But religion was just a pretext, as his chancellor Axel Oxenstierna would later

confirm. He wanted to push back Habsburg influence in northern Germany which threatened Swedish commercial interests in the Baltic. Adolphus also wanted territorial gains against Sweden's long term enemy, the Danes. France secretly financed Gustavus Adolphus to the tune of 400,000 thalers annually for a period of five years. Doing this kept the threat of war away from France's borders. Adolphus pressured the German princes to accept his protectorate. He offered the Winter King his lands back, but only if Frederick's father-in-law, James I of England, supported Sweden with money and troops. Frederick declined the Faustian pact: he would become nothing more than a puppet. Adolphus crushed the Catholic League commander, Count of Tilly, at Breitenfeld and was joined by John George of Saxony, a Lutheran who had previously supported the emperor, but switched sides after the Edict of Restitution. The Swedish monarch would fall at the Battle of Lűtzen, though his army prevailed. Without his leadership it was hard to see the campaign succeeding as it had created a succession crisis back in Stockholm, contributing to a treaty being signed at Prague.

The Treaty of Lubeck ended Denmark's involvement. The peace deal did not greatly satisfy either side. Although it gave Ferdinand II, Holy Roman Emperor, the leverage to impose the Edict of Restitution, ordering Protestants to surrender all ecclesiastical lands acquired since the Peace of Augsburg. King Christian IV had entered the conflict portraying himself as protector of Lutherans throughout northern Europe, yet was driven by the interests of his kingdom: dominating the Hanseatic League and keeping rival Sweden out of Denmark's own backyard.

After his defeat at White Mountain, the battle that

ended the first phase of a long war, Frederick V, King of Bohemia, fled. His short reign earned him the sobriquet, The Winter King. The elector of the Palatinate was offered the crown of Bohemia, to lead the Reformation against Catholicism. After some indecision he chose to accept: perhaps he should have paid more attention to his cautiousness. He was also a man of ambition and strong Calvinist conviction. But ambition and conviction can be a dangerous combination. There was a long feud between the Rhine principality and the Habsburgs. In the Middle Ages the Palatinate had been far more powerful. Frederick looked to classical myth and selective history to reinforce his own sense of destiny, and confirmation of ultimate victory. He appeared at tournaments dressed as Jason, leader of the Argonauts, the man who stole the golden fleece, strongly symbolic to the Habsburgs. He also dressed as Roman general Scipio, conqueror of Carthaginian Iberia, veiled threat to Habsburg Spain. He wore the attire of Arminius, appealing to Teutonic identity, the Germanic chieftain that defeated the Roman legions of Varus. Frederick believed God had chosen him, and prophecies foretold a golden age with Frederick as the last emperor before the Day of Judgement. He was doing God's will; his motto was: 'Rule me, Lord, according to your word'. What he was finally offered: to be a marionette of Sweden.

As the clouds of war gathered, the new emperor looked to his war chest. But it was much depleted. On his accession Ferdinand was already twenty million florins in debt. Tax takes from the rebel estates were now closed to him. He sought out support from Spain, the papacy, Saxony, Bavaria – even France. Catholic Duke Maximillian of Bavaria wanted compensation, at the

expense of the Palatinate, with which his family had a long bitter rivalry. He wished to have the prince-elector status for Bavaria. The duchy also had territorial rivalry with the House of Austria, the problems raised by grey contiguous borders. Spain was slow to get involved, with more pressing matters in the strategic Spanish Road linking domains in Italy and the Low Countries. France offered mediation help, not won over to Ferdinand's argument the Bohemian rising was a threat to Catholic monarchy.

Ferdinand II, Archduke of Styria, was elected Holy Roman Emperor in 1619, succeeding his cousin Mathias. Rebellion in Bohemia was only a distraction from his real goal – the imperial crown. To ensure his election he confirmed confessional privileges would be respected, though considered they had been foisted upon the earlier Emperor Rudolf. He promised the rebels would be pardoned if they put down their weapons. It was clear he would be elected: he was the only real candidate. The Protestant opposition was weak and divided. The Calvinist elector Palatine, Frederick V, failed to win support of Lutheran Saxony to extract more religious concessions. The Palatine, fearing being isolated, felt compelled to fall into line.

But the rebels deprived Ferdinand of the Bohemian and Hungarian crowns, which had passed to the family nearly a hundred years earlier after Louis II of Hungary was killed at the Battle of Mohács. The rebels formed a Confederation, electing Frederick V as their king. They marked the occasion with a commemorative medal, inscribed pointedly with the words: 'King by the Grace of God and the Estates', warning him off unbridled ambition, those who gave him power could take it away.

The Protestant estates in Bohemia felt the rights

granted to them by the Letter of Majesty were under threat, and rose up against the Habsburgs' royal authority in Prague. In what became known as The Defenestration of Prague an angry party of nobles threw the government officials from the window of the Bohemian chancellery, angry that their grievances had been met with the dissolution of their assembly. No one knew a war costing millions of lives and lasting for thirty years would follow.

Rudolf II was elected Holy Roman Emperor in 1576, but his increasingly erratic behaviour gave his brother, Matthias, who had his eye on the imperial throne, the opportunity to work against his sibling and have himself appointed successor by the prince electors. He justified his actions saying the aim was to restore stability within the monarchy and empire. And he had cross-confessional support for constitutional resolution. Yet his plan would prove impossible without solid concessions to the Protestant estates. Concessions were given to the Hungarian Protestant nobility: at the expense of the Catholics. He also needed the backing of Bohemia: there would be a price. But Rudolf also had something to offer them – The Letter of Majesty. He was in a weak position. The civil war with his brother had left Rudolf's coffers empty. He had no choice but agree. He became prisoner to their demands.

The power struggle between Rudolf and Mathias continued. Their cousin Leopold offered the emperor an opportunity to break the commitments he made to the estates. With both cavalry and foot soldiers to support him he promised he could deliver victory to the imperial king. His price: to succeed him as Holy Roman Emperor. But he had not resolved the problem of paying his own troops, reduced to plunder and threats to switch sides. Mathias

seized the opportunity to raise a small army claiming he could restore order: German and Bohemian Protestants saw him as saviour, though many Catholics felt betrayed. Bohemia also had the privileges granted it put down in writing. Most parties did not want war it seemed. Leopold backed down and his army was paid off. Mathias could not now be stopped in his drive to become Holy Roman Emperor. He threatened to cut off food supplies to Prague Castle, where Rudolf was holding out, if he did not agree to surrender the crown. Rudolf engaged in feverish plots to regain his throne. It was even rumoured the ousted emperor would marry the widowed mother of the elector Palatine, join the Protestant Union and create a new army. But his position was hopeless. Duly Mathias was unanimously elected Holy Roman Emperor at an assembly of the electors in Frankfurt, by which time his predecessor had already died and his dreams with him.

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In 1598 Henry of Navarre became first Bourbon monarch of France. As King Henry IV he converted to Catholicism and through the Edict of Nantes granted considerable freedoms to the Huguenots, ending over three decades of bitter strife, which came to be called the French Wars of Religion. While he had been baptized a Catholic he had been brought up a Protestant. But he was senior agnatic descendent of sainted King Louis IX. And so under Salic law he was rightful heir to the throne of France, though opposed by many Catholics. In the end – for peace – he was persuaded by his mistress, Gabrielle d'Estrées, to re-convert. What did not change was his rivalry with the Habsburgs, fellow Catholics. The old battles continued. He declared war on the Spanish monarchy, accusing it of using

religion as an excuse to attack the French state.

King Henry III had opposed his claim to the throne. But he himself was in danger from that other rival, the Duke of Guise, the two factions now in an uneasy alliance, and so had him assassinated. Henry would be killed, by a third Catholic, Dominican friar Jacques Clément, under the instructions of Catherine de Lorraine, sister of the assassinated duke. It was a long dynastic struggle between the houses of Guise and ruling house of Valois. When Henry II died his consort, Catherine de Medici, ruled as regent: the driving aim to keep the Valois family on the throne, and stop the House of Guise grabbing power. That family, descended from Charlemagne, had long coveted the crown of France. And de Medici was not averse to alliance with the Protestant Bourbons to stop them. Other aristocrats, the boundaries of their ambitions limited by hereditary succession, also wanted power, seeking it under the leadership of the Princes of the Blood.

In 1566, three years into the French Wars of Religion, the Calvinists of the Spanish Netherlands revolted against the excesses of the Inquisition and imperial despotism. A war France would be drawn into: on the side of Lutheran and Calvinist.

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The Peace of Cateau Cambrésis brought an end to more than half a century of war between the houses of Habsburg and Valois, made possible by the abdication of Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, and his division of the vast Habsburg Empire between the Austrian and Spanish branches. The move allowed France open negotiations, as it significantly loosened the noose of Habsburg encirclement. For its part France promised to keep out of

the Spanish Netherland and the imperial fiefs of northern Italy.

Peace, or relative peace, also came to Germany about this time in the Augsburg Settlement; it lasted for over sixty years. It concluded the war between the emperor and his Protestants enemies, the Schmalkaldic League, which had been supported by France. Charles instructed his brother Ferdinand, successor as Holy Roman Emperor, to sign the Treaty of Augsburg. The longstanding aim of Charles, consolidating his own dynastic power under one constitutional and religious order, now looked an unrealizable dream.

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In pursuit of a male heir Henry VIII of England had his marriage to Catherine of Aragon annulled. Opposed by Pope Clement Henry broke with Rome, creating the Church of England with himself as its head. As its supreme head he dissolved the monasteries, representing a quarter of the land in the realm, drawing in huge wealth to the royal treasury and enabling Henry to finance his wars and lifestyle. Monastic lands were sold off to the King's supporters – gentry and merchants – who backed his break with Rome.

He ruled by divine right in matters spiritual and temporal. Yet within a hundred years his actions would undermine the metaphysical concept, granting favours to those who would challenge the right of kings.

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Pope Clement VII, successor to Leo X, raised an alliance to drive Charles V from Italy, his chief supporter

Francis I of France. The Holy Roman Emperor's forces had ransacked Rome and forced the pope to flee. Among the unpaid looters were the mercenaries of the Duke of Bourbon, seizing what booty they could. The duke had been allied to the Valois monarch but had fallen out, then switched his allegiance to the Habsburgs. King Henry VIII of England, outraged by the sacrilege of burning the Holy City, gave his backing to Clement's alliance.

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The legendary Florian Geyer was an inspiration for future generations, from people as diverse as Engels and Hitler. The German knight led the Peasants' Revolt against the harsh taxes imposed by their feudal masters. With his heavy cavalry, the Black Band, and the fiery Preacher Thomas Munszer, he inspired the peasants to fight on against their oppressors, which they did – to ultimate defeat.

The peasants' feudal masters had themselves rebelled against their own masters, the higher nobility and princes, embracing the revolutionary zeal of the Reformation. These imperial knights were in financial decline, falling land values and increasing interest rates were impoverishing them. Cities of the Holy Roman Empire got stronger and were able to resist the attacks of marauding gangs. So they created the Brotherly Convention of Knights and rebelled against their overlords. They were led by Franz Von Sickingen, who had spent much of his career pillaging cities and principalities up and down the Rhine. He came under the influence of the religious humanist knight, Ulrich Von Hutten, and was a supporter of Martin Luther. The revolt defeated, many of the knights squeezed as much as they could out of their

own peasant labourers: so they in turn rose up. Von Sickingen, already a rich landowner, further increased his wealth by supporting the cause of the oppressed. Despite his leaning to the Protestant confession he nonetheless supported Charles V to be elected emperor in 1519: his backing, and a large body of troops, helped the Habsburg's succession, for which he was made imperial chamberlain and councillor.

When Charles V was elected Holy Roman Emperor he brought with him a vast inheritance including: the kingdom of Spain and its global empire with so much riches it was thought the sun would never set, the Habsburg Netherlands, Franche-Comté and the Austrian Habsburg hereditary lands. He would continue his ongoing feud with Catholic France, ally with one pope – Leo X, to excommunicate Martin Luther – and get into conflict with another, fight the Ottomans who were supported by the French and battle the German princes to consolidate his own personal power over his sprawling domains. Yet he would show compromise in this last objective. Still, he saw his destiny much in the tradition of Charlemagne, ruling over a united Christendom.

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At the Battle of Bosworth Lord Stanley finally entered the fray to bring Henry Tudor victory with the slaying of Richard III. Having watched from the sides, uncertain which army would win: which side his life and fortunes lay. Stanley's son was the king's hostage – at moment's order beheaded – and should have decided his loyalty if fatherly love was the only motive.

Richard fought bravely, though he had been haunted by fearful dreams in the preceding period. He had

no heir. Without a legitimate successor the temptation to rise against a ruling monarch grows. The last Plantagenet saw the figure of a claimant in the shadows of his nightmares. He killed his loyal friend, Hastings, and de-legitimized his brother's marriage, which would make him rightful heir not Edward's first son. On the death of his brother, he had promised to act as regent until Edward came of age to be crowned. But in the bloody family feud it was clear: at its primordial level, the struggle for power is the struggle for life. He recalled the eventual execution of his other brother George for his attempts to topple their sibling the king in his own jealous bid for the crown. Others wanted power, to stay alive required power to decide life or death for others. So Richard, Duke of Gloucester, rich and powerful, ostentatious in the trappings of wealth – all things that create the appearance of invulnerability – found he needed to be sovereign. He coveted all the things his brother George, Duke of Clarence, coveted. Seizing control was the logical step.

King Edward IV had died suddenly in 1483, having replaced Henry VI. Throughout his reign he was loyally supported by his brother, Gloucester: unlike Clarence, who plotted against him. There were divisions within the divisions of Yorkist and Lancastrian, both branches claiming the throne, both branches descended from King Edward III, upon which both sides based legitimacy.

Henry VI was from the Lancastrian branch of the Plantagenet dynasty. When England's defeat came at the Battle of Castillon, war lasting more than a century coming to an end, the scapegoat was Henry. But while defeat in France was unfolding the Albion factions fought amongst themselves, ignoring the authority of their king, scuppering plans to return to the disputes across the Channel. Petty

squabbles revealed true motives, contradicting the natural order and authority of the anointed sovereign. York and Somerset fought over the post of Stewart of Cornwall. Somerset also found a rival in the Earl of Warwick: over the possession of matrimonial lands in Wales. While in the north, the Nevilles fought with the Percy family over land, both ignoring summons to attend the King's council and settle their differences. The line between Yorkist and Lancastrian was being drawn. Both camps wanted power: both felt threatened. Warwick, with the largest militia army at his disposal, would align with York, where he concluded his interests were best served; but that position would change before Barnett. For he served neither cause, only his own ambition.

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Victory in the Hundred Years' War set the House of Valois on a course of dynastic expansion. As kings of France they consolidated control over much of the country. The war began in 1337 over who had the right to rule France, between the ruling French dynasty and the English House of Plantagenet. Because of Norman and Angevin links the kings of England held titles and lands in France, making them vassals of the Valois king. But the English kings resented this – a king having to pay homage to a king. In addition to power rivalry and pride, wool exports to Flanders were a vital source of revenue for the English crown, and France's Auld Alliance with Scotland a threat to England's northern borders – perhaps the greatest threat of all: loss of the throne.

In 1328 Charles IV of France died without a male heir: his closest male relative was his nephew, Edward III of England, whose mother was Isabella of France,

Charles's sister. She claimed the throne for her son but the French nobility rejected it, insisting only a French man should succeed. Charles's cousin was chosen, Philip Count of Valois. As he consolidated his position he approached the thorny issue of his English vassals. He demanded Gascony, the last English bastion, fearful the English crown could use the province to further English interests in France – to Philip's detriment. Edward refused, renewed his claim to the French throne, resigned to settling the dispute on the battlefield, a conflict with long term consequences among the English who profited from it, losing even more by the repercussions of their defeat.

Edward III came to the throne as a knightly king, breaking free of the enforced regency of his mother and her lover. Jousting tournaments and pageantry trumpeted his vision as a modern day King Arthur or St George. He was always fascinated by the heroes of history and myth: the Nine Worthies, spanning pagan, Old Testament and Christendom. Edward was happy to be viewed as the fulfilment of ancient prophecies. And he would take to the battlefield with the dream of a revived Plantagenet empire. But that war, England would ultimately lose, and his son, like him an anointed sovereign, stripped of power by his own cousin.

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On hearing Constantinople had fallen to the Muslims, the Venetian fleet sent to relieve the capital of Eastern Roman Empire continued its journey: to forge a commercial deal with the Ottoman victor, commercial realism prevailing among its merchants: for the people of the city had a saying – they were Venetians first Christians second.

Mehmed II made conquered Byzantium his capital.

On his victory procession through the city he stopped at the Hagia Sophia, where he prayed, and ordered the church be converted into a mosque. The power of the sword had brought him more success than it had any other Muslim sovereign in the holy war against the infidel. Now he sat upon the throne of the caesars, from which he could rule the world without limit to his power. But there were always rivals. As was the tradition Mehmed had his younger brother Ahmed strangled. Yet so unlikely his own chances of becoming sultan, Mehmed could have been easily fooled that chance had no part. The sultan became known as Mehmed the Conqueror. His new strategic conquest offered further conquest. The Ottomans now controlled the Bosporus and Dardanelle Straits. The Turkish fleet sailed into the Black Sea, demanding tribute from those who lived along its shores. Mehmed decided the River Danube would be the empire's natural frontier: no foreign power would be allowed into the Balkans, south of the wide stretch of water.

The future for the Ottomans had not always seemed quite as certain: the challenge to Timur ill-advised, ultimately the lesson never learned. At the opening of the 15th century the Mongol ruler, Timur, had carved out a vast empire in Asia that stretched as far west as Iran. He also proclaimed himself heir to the sovereign rights of the Ilkhanids over Anatolia, in a direct challenge to the Ottomans, who ruled the territory. At the ensuing Battle of Ankara Timur's army routed the Turks. Sultan Bayezid's empire-building had been demolished and his lands divided between his sons, who accepted Timur's sovereignty, but who then descended into internecine war. The ambition of conquering Constantinople seemed a remote dream. The Byzantines were quick to exploit the

reality created by the victory of the Mongols, supporting one Ottoman prince against another.

*

In the remonstrances of 1297 leading English noblemen attacked the king's crushing taxes needed to finance his costly wars. In that year King Edward was planning another campaign to protect his possessions in Gascony and trading interests in Flanders. He was also fighting north of the border against the Scots. Two leading earls, Bohun and Bigod, refused to provide financial support and accused the monarch of failing to uphold Magna Carter. Although personal land disputes and historic debts contributed to their sense of injustice, as well as the heavy losses incurred from high taxes. Still, the impasse left the country teetering on the edge of civil war. But defeat at the Battle of Stirling Bridge united them all against the common threat: William Wallace, Scottish Independence leader. Edward promised to address their grievances and confirmed his commitment to Magna Carta. The nobles promised the financial support their sovereign needed.

King Edward I of England had demanded Scotland recognize him as feudal overlord, and its magnates provide troops in his war against France, which ironically saw him as its vassal. Instead Scotland allied with Paris, in what would become the Auld Alliance. Edward wanted to subdue them as he had tried the Welsh in the pursuit of Arthur's crown. In 1294 Philip IV of France declared Gascony forfeit when Edward refused to appear before him in Paris – his feudal lord. The wars would put huge financial pressures on Edward's finances, both during his reign and reigns of those to follow.

*

When King John died from dysentery, in the midst of his civil war with the English barons, the source of their grievance was gone. Now their backer, Prince Louis of France, was their main grievance – their greatest threat. So the magnates crowned John's nine year old son as sovereign, with the Earl of Pembroke, William Marshal, as his regent. Henry had a better fate than his cousin Arthur, who King John had murdered in his earlier struggle for the throne.

Louis suffered a major defeat at Lewes as he retreated back to the coast to meet up with a French fleet. He escaped across the channel, the next year returning with reinforcements. But in a year he found himself defeated by the Earl of Pembroke, forcing him to sue for peace.

The English realm plunged into civil war when a group of powerful barons rose up against King John. They claimed he had broken the terms of the Magna Carta. John had also fought a disastrous war against France, costing him the Angevin Empire, a campaign many nobles opposed: nothing to their interest and only taxes extracted to finance it. It was to the French court the rebels looked. Prince Louis, heir apparent, led an invasion. From Kent he made his way to London, entering unopposed as John had fled the capital. He was quickly proclaimed king, and many of John's supporters – sensing a fundamental shift of power – changed their allegiance. In such situations, the importance of holding on to what you have is emphasized by seeing how much you potentially have to lose. But fortunes change, random certainty.

*

Henry the Younger, son and heir to King Henry II, wanted real power: the father was resistant to give it. So Henry junior rebelled against his father, joined by his mother and brothers Richard and Geoffrey. All had personal reasons for a united front. Henry the Younger succeeded to the kingdom of England, the duchy of Aquitaine and the county of Anjou. Yet the father restricted him access to landed revenue – real kingship. The son was heavily in debt because of his lavish lifestyle, debts he had to repay. He sought the assistance of his father's greatest rival, the French king. The young king's mother had similar grievance. She was Duchess of Aquitaine in her own right but found her political power being eroded by her husband. He made decisions without consultation, ignoring her prerogative. Henry's two siblings also feared for any inheritance they might be rightfully entitled to from their father.

With some of his barons, and the Scots, also aligned with his son Henry felt the stormy sea he was cast out upon needed God at the helm, to guide him to shore – to victory. He prayed, did penance seeking absolution for the murder of Thomas Beckett: scene of that earlier power struggle. This power struggle required support of God and the martyred archbishop to move the Great War in his favour. Henry II would be victor, a glowing pride in the feeling of divine endorsement. It allowed him take a gamble: when it paid-off marked as a sign. While generous to his sons in victory he made no substantive concession on power. That could only be granted upon his death: the dead face no fearful consequences from the loss of power. But he would live to see that loss of power in this world, tasting both the sweetness of victory and bitterness of defeat.

*

The war between Matilda and her cousin Stephen ended in mutual exhaustion rather in outright defeat or victory. After years of fighting, most of the campaigning being carried out by Matilda's son Henry FitzEmpress, both sides found themselves settling for a peace. Upon King Stephen's death, Henry would succeed to the throne. Stephen's son Eustace was furious, the treaty depriving him of his claim to the throne, and swore to resist. But he fell ill and died before having time to raise a new army. There was no obstacle to Matilda's son being crowned, as King Henry II of England and Duke of Normandy.

Henry's grandfather, King Henry I of England, lost his fourth son and heir tragically, and having no other legitimate male offspring, wanted his daughter Empress Matilda to rule as queen. She was the widow of a Holy Roman Emperor. She was persuaded to marry Geoffrey of Anjou – the fourth son of a mere count, which she found demeaning. But the marriage was of strategic importance to her father: Anjou lay to the south of his dukedom. Union between the two families would bring much-desired security.

Henry I was fourth son of William the Conqueror, and must have felt he was struggling in mountainous seas. He had been left without inheritance, his elder brothers Robert Curthose and William Rufus inheriting Normandy and England respectively. In their future quarrels he would choose the course that best served him – and bring him to power. The death of William: Henry found himself on dry land – seizing the crown of England. He would skilfully manipulate the English barons. Although they would thrive from the civil war that followed his death – The Anarchy.

It did not take a storm and a ship wreck to create the human maelstrom: the calmest waters would not have prevented what transpired.

*

'These are the narratives of bygone years regarding the origin of the land of Rus', wrote the Russian chronicler, Nestor, at the beginning of the 12th century, two hundred years after the events described. The purpose: how the Rurikids, merchant warriors from Scandinavia, came to rule over the eastern Slavs – narrative glorifying present and past. The Slavs called these traders Varangians: bringing with them slaves, hides, honey and wax which they traded for corn, silk, wine and other luxury goods. At first the Slavic tribes refused to pay tribute to them, proud and desiring their freedom. But the Slavs fought among themselves over who would dominate. Eventually they returned to the Varangian ruler, Rurik, inviting him to be their overlord and put an end to the feuding. It was an arrangement that served both parties. It became a Viking-Slav super alliance, its centre at Kiev, an empire only rivalled by the Carolingians of Charlemagne. It would eventually bring them to the walls of Byzantium – richest prize of all.

*

With the death of Duke Rudolf of Swabia the Great Saxon Revolt against the Holy Roman Emperor Henry IV began to lose momentum, and within the year would be over.

Beneath the symbols of ring and crozier lay the power struggle between pope and monarch. Traditionally monarchs had selected the senior clergy. But in 1075 Pope

Gregory VII enunciated the twenty-seven propositions on papal supremacy, that kings had no authority in such matters. It was the pope who had final say in all matters – temporal and spiritual – with the authority to depose rulers that made appointments without Rome's approval. But beneath this titanic power struggle were other rivalries.

The pope excommunicated the emperor, triggering the opportunistic revolt by German barons who resented the overweening power of the empire's ruler. They elected the Duke Rudolf of Swabia as anti-king. He had up to this point supported Henry, his brother-in-law: he now promised to support canon law on investiture, which became a justification for gaining power.

The bitter disputes between the Salian royal family and the Saxons came to a head in 1070, when the Saxon nobility rose up in rebellion. Henry IV had been making demands on the estates of the Saxons, especially the Rammelsberg silver mines, moves which were naturally resented and had to be resisted; resistance that led to defeat: to await the next opportunity, which would not be long.

*

Succession rivalry ran in the blood. In 1066 William Duke of Normandy invaded England in claim of the crown: a victory that would make him equal to his suzerain lord, the monarch of France. At the Battle of Hastings his adversary, Anglo-Saxon King Harold, was slain: an arrow through the eye, his body trampled under hoof then mutilated. In his short reign Harold fought two battles with claimants to the English throne. Harold Godwinson, Earl of Wessex and descended from King Cnut, repelled a Norse invasion near York before marching south to meet his Nemesis, William

Duke of Normandy.

William grew up in an environment where power mattered most – life or death. While he was cruel to those who opposed him, he would marry for love and remain faithful to that one woman. As a boy he was like a lamb being circled by wolves. For the feudal lords in the duchy wanted to rule, and saw the opportunity after the death of William's father when the child was just eight. It was not only the Norman lords that smelled blood. The king of France and Duke of Brittany had their appetites whetted by the feast of disorder. His counsellors were killed, but the young duke was not harmed: the illusion that some perimeter of sanctity set limits to the lust for power. Even that line was crossed, illusion shattered: in time the young duke himself would have to be killed. But he was saved from death by the warnings of a jester. And he would prevail in the power struggle gripping Normandy.

*

Otto the Great, Holy Roman Emperor came into conflict with Rome. He viewed the papacy with distain, ordering that no pope should be consecrated before swearing allegiance to the empire. He saw himself ruling by divine right, secular protector of the Church, but foremost champion for his own power and ultimate authority over Rome.

As king Otto I of Germany he defeated the pagan Magyars at the Battle of Lechfeld and was hailed as the saviour of Christendom, crowned Holy Roman Emperor by the pope. He came from Saxon stock, once fierce pagans themselves. His victory against the Hungarians followed on from the crushing of rebel duchies, the two events securing his authority over the kingdom.

*

The origins of the Dane, Rollo, are obscure though illuminated somewhat by Dudo, canon of Saint Quentin. He is recorded as founder of Normandy at the beginning of the tenth century, establishing a settlement on the lower River Seine. The invaders eventually made peace with the Frankish Kingdom. While vassal to the king of the Franks, Rollo still enjoyed de facto independence. He continued his Norse traditions, raiding into adjacent Flanders. Though he respected his peace with the Carolingians, acting as guardian of the coastline and bulwark against other Vikings penetrating into the heartland.

Carolingian power would crumble, just as Merovingian had before it. The Treaty of Verdun divided the empire of Charlemagne between his three grandsons. The rivalry it begot lasted centuries, the source of over a millennium of strife and conflict. The Frankish lands west of the Rhine and northern Italy went to Lothair, the reigning emperor. In the east the Teutonic lands went to his brother, Louis the German. Their half-brother, Charles the Bald, was granted the territories which would come to make up most of France.

On Christmas Day, 800, the Frankish king Charlemagne was crowned Emperor of the Romans by Pope Leo III. The papacy needed the security of temporal power in its disputes with the Lombards and Byzantine Empire. The Carolingian ruler could give that protection, and even herald the renewal of the former Western Empire in all its glory.

Charlemagne's dynasty had expanded dramatically during his reign, engaged in almost constant warfare. He defeated the powerful Saxons, converting them to

Christianity. He conquered the Lombard kingdom of Christian ruler Desiderius in alliance with the Papal States. In his conflict with the Saxons Charlemagne wanted to achieve something the Roman Empire never did: security of its northern borders. His realm experienced devastating raids from the sea, Scandinavian marauders who had for so long lived peacefully with the Frankish and Slavic neighbours. Charlemagne inspected his shore defences along what one day would become Normandy, and knew their importance. Race after race invaded the land. The remains of Gallo-Roman villas, amphitheatres and aqueducts warnings from an empire long gone and once so strong it thought it could never be vanquished. Expansion had its own perils, as had pride. Charlemagne's conquest of Nordalbingia brought the Frankish frontier threateningly close to the Scandinavians of Jutland. In response, Gudfred, king of the Danes, expanded the ancient earthwork defences called the Danevirke, originally build in the mid-seventh century. The Danish king's order to commence raids was as much to check the encroachment of the Franks as for his own aggrandizement.

*

The monk Bede would write in the eighth century that Vortigern, King of the Britons, invited a band of Saxon mercenaries to England, led by the brothers Hengist and Horsa, to fight invading Picts and Irish. The Saxons brought with them victory, but chose then to seize power for themselves. They sent message, according to the Anglo-Saxon chronicles, describing 'the worthlessness of the Britons, and the richness of the land.' They brought reinforcement from their homeland in north west Europe, itself in turmoil because of the disintegrating Roman

Empire. They were joined by two other neighbouring Germanic tribes, the Angles and the Jutes. The Romano-British warlord, Ambrosius Aurelianius, is said have reversed the successes of the invaders for a number of decades, according to the writings of near-contemporary St Gildas.

For the first time in three and a half centuries Britannia was virtually defenceless as the Roman garrison was withdrawn to defend the empire on the continent. In the wake, the Saxons increased their raids across the North Sea. The Romano-British were on their own. It seemed only feverish myth could give them solace and hope. And was born the Arthurian hero, more inspiring as legendary figure than living flesh. He led the campaign against the invading Saxons, in one battle alone killing nearly a thousand of them with his own sword. He was not a mere mortal but a monster-hunting human with supernatural powers, never finally slain, but waiting in the Otherword – to come again.

*

Increased raids by the Lombards forced Pope Stephen II to cross the Alps in the depths of winter and seek support from Frankish king, Pepin the Short, first ruler of the Carolingian dynasty, coming to power after overthrowing Childeric III, last of the Merovingians, then eliminating sibling rivalry.

Pepin had recently defeated a Muslim invasion of Gaul and welcomed the opportunities presented by such an alliance. He had attacked Lombardy, defeating its king Aistulf. So Pepin was in a position to provide security for the Church – and so the temporal reign of the papacy had begun with the formation of the Papal States – while Pepin

extracted a crippling annual tribute from the Kingdom of Lombardy.

But it was unclear if the territories under the suzerainty of the pope were truly the sovereign territory of the Duchy of Rome, or in reality part of the Frankish Empire. It would result in violent disputes between caesar and pontiff in the unfolding centuries. In reality Rome had considerable difficulty controlling the lands within its boundaries.

Aistulf had been expanding his territory, raiding into northern Italy. His forces moved closer to Rome, threatening the patriarch itself. Aistulf was a pious Catholic and offered peace to the pontiff, but under Lombard hegemony: an offer that could not be accepted.

*

King Albion of Lombardy, crossed the Alps from Pannonia into Northern Italy, to take advantage of Emperor Justinian's weakened empire following its crippling war with the Goths. His united coalition of numerous tribes swept across the northern plains facing little resistance. The empire was rich in pickings, and other tribes were easily persuaded to join the invasion.

Albion, in alliance with the Avars, had recently won a crushing victory against the Gepids. Victory had not greatly increased his power, but it had his ally, hastening Albion's decision to move south. He signed a further treaty with the Avar ruler, handing his lands to the tribe to secure against any overland counter attack by the Eastern Romans. For double security he scorched the earth on Pannonia: a double safety zone – between Lombard and Avar. Albion discovered that interest can divide as much as it can unite.

While later sagas about the hero-king immortalized him in verse, factionalism among his invading army destroyed Albion's dream of glory. A Byzantine plot with the help of his queen, Rosamund, and foster brother, Helmichis, led to his assassination. The repercussions would stretch far beyond the steps of the royal palace in Verona where Albion was killed.

Helmichis was a Lombard noble, whose purpose was to usurp power. Rosamund's was perhaps more personal. On killing her father, Cunimund king of the Gepids, the young king Albion married the daughter. Rosamund had witnessed the dying days of her Germanic people: first at the onslaught of a Lombard-byzantine alliance, then one between the Lombards and Avars. Having seen her father beheaded and herself taken as captive, she developed a simmering hatred for her husband, who is said to have made her drink from her dead father's skull, a trophy Albion treasured as much as his penchant for cruelty.

*

Lost power creates the longing for it to be regained. For Justinian the Great, personal fame of restoring the Roman Empire is supported by historic pattern, even if historic facts are dim. For centuries he resided in the sphere of Mercury. But past, present and future are brought together as pattern. What greater justification but divine duty? He sent his armies to re-conquer the Western Empire. But Justinian stretched the resources of his empire. Ultimately, the consequences could not be stemmed.

The seventy metre column he built in the heart of Constantinople to his achievement in renewing the old empire would outlive the successes it commemorated.

Atop was a huge dazzling brass equestrian statue of the emperor, wearing a muscle cuirass and a helmet plumed with peacock feathers. In his left hand he held the Orb of the Cross: his right hand pointed to the east. The orb would fall centuries later, bringing pessimistic gloom to the superstitious Byzantines. Its fall to the ground was the real symbolism. The globe came to be called the Red Apple, a term that would have symbolic significance to a later conquering nation, seeking that lustrous fruit – world power.

*

Out of the chaos of Rome's collapse came the order of the Merovingian dynasty. Its first ruler was Clovis, king of the Salian Franks. In 481 he defeated the last general representing the now more-or-less defunct Western Empire, Syagrius, ruling over a Gallo-Roman enclave in northern Gaul. But his ambitions and luck were helped by the defeat of another Roman general, Flavius Aetius, three decades earlier, opening the way for the fall of Roman Gaul. He would become master of all the Franks, gradually conquering the many smaller tribes of the Frankish nation. He also overthrew the Alemanni in eastern Gaul and the Visigoths of Aquitania. The Merovingians would dominate Europe for the next two hundred years. In his decisive battle against Syagrius the young ruler had as a key ally his relative, Ragnachar, ruler of Cambrai. But being relatives would not bind them in loyalty. Ragnachar, out of avarice, chose to defy Clovis. To which the king bribed Ragnachar's bodyguards to betray their master, opening the way for his overthrow. Clovis slaughtered his cousin with an axe, inheriting the former's petty kingdom and in time – all else.

The Franks were descended from a sea-beast named the Quinotaur according to Germanic mythology, giving rise to the idea that the dynasty was of supernatural origin. Early accounts by the geographer Ptolemy refer to a tribe called the Marvingi situated at the mouth of the Rhine delta. The Salian branch was at one time ally of the Romans fighting against other Frankish groups: when Roman power went the Salian king stepped in, replacing those who had once paid them.

*

Theodoric the Great drew his sword and killed Odoacer as they feasted at a banquet of reconciliation. He went on to slaughter Odoacer's wife and followers, ensuring that absolute power would be his. War between the two had ended with a peace treaty where the two would jointly rule the Western Empire. Theodoric was king of the Ostrogoths, an ally of Zeno, ruler of the Eastern Roman Empire, who encouraged him to wage war against Odoacer, who had seized power by overthrowing the child emperor, Romulus Augustus.

The Eastern Emperor also saw Odoacer as a potential threat. The Ostrogoth leader was promised the whole Italian Peninsula as his reward, but was suspicious of Zeno's motives – remembering Armatus. The Byzantine ruler was uneasy about the closeness of the Gothic tribe, which lived unnervingly close to Constantinople. Keeping the Ostrogoths distracted by a campaign in the west would suit him for the time being. So Theodoric was persuaded to lead his army over the Julian Alps. And after several years of engagement swinging between victory and defeat, treachery and loyalty the two sides agreed on compromise. But finally the hand of peace would wield the sword.

*

In 476 AD the Germanic warrior Odoacer entered Rome to overthrow the incumbent emperor. The one-time general in the Roman army easily dethroned the sixteen year old ruler, Romulus Augustus, considered a mere puppet put on the throne by his scheming father Orestes, the military commander who had overthrown the western emperor Julius Nepos. Discontentment grew when Orestes refused demands by the foederati for lands in payment for military services. And the tribe, once willing to fight for Rome, called on their Arian Christian commander Odoacer to lead a rebellion – to realize the treasures they coveted. Odoacer crushed the coup by Romulus' father. And so he came to power, but ruling over the mere husk of the once-great empire.

News reached Rome that a huge Vandal fleet was sailing up the west coast of Italy towards the capital. Panic gripped the city, its population having already experienced the terror of powerlessness. Emperor Petronius Maximus, the high ranking senator who had come to power by deviously overthrowing Emperor Valentinian III, realized Rome could not be defended. There was no option but flee. But as he rode out a mob – angry he was deserting the city – pulled him from his horse and killed him, throwing his corpse into the Tiber. Three days later Gieseric arrived and sacked the city. When Rome lost North Africa to the Vandals it lost its source of grain and olive oil, the means to feed its population; it was only a matter of time. Its legions were too preoccupied in Gaul to confront this disastrous loss. Troops had had to be deployed to the Danube to repulse the Hunnic invasion. Nothing could be done to reverse the Vandal conquest of the African

provinces.

Finally the Huns themselves arrived at the frontier of the empire, led by their chieftain, Attila. The Romans, supported by Visigoths and Burgundians, pushed back the Hunnic advance into Gaul. But events would swing the other way once again. Shortage of imperial troops left the road to Rome open to Attila. But Rome was saved on this occasion: threat to his homelands by the Eastern Romans forced Attila on to the retreat, and the end of his own nomadic empire. His three sons would want to divide the empire. But they could not hold together what the father had forged, just as he was not able to. The alluring strength of a powerful individual, combined with fortuitous circumstance, cannot be simply passed on. When Attila died, his dominion died with him. The eldest son, Ellac, was killed at the Battle of Nedeo. Former vassals rose up against the brothers' authority. The Germanic tribes got their revenge for Balamber. Each of Attila's sons had wanted suzerainty for himself. But Hunnic dominance of central and eastern Europe had been broken. The sons could not emulate the myth that their father would inspire. Attila was said to have the 'Holy Sword of the Scythians', given to him by Mars, which would make him prince of the world. Later dynasties would claim descent from him. Centuries on, goldsmiths would create the very sword presented by the Roman god. A tale was told, that the pope had persuaded Attila to spare Rome, for one of his successors would be rewarded by God with the Holy Crown of Hungary.

When the ambitious King Alaric, ruler of the Visigoths or west Goths, came to power he demanded a high price for helping to defend the empire against invasion by other tribes. His hand seemed strengthened by

the collapse of the Rhine in 406. The empire needed the Visigoths to repel a coalition of Vandals, Alans and Suebi. But the price demanded by the Goths was too great and the Roman senate refused to pay. So Alaric marched his army to the walls of Rome. Facing starvation, the occupants had no choice but open the gates to the besiegers. Alaric proceeded to sack the city, a profound humiliation for the proud Latin people, unsettling the collective psyche: not for eight hundred years had their city been overrun, by the Gallic Celt warriors led by their chieftain Brennus, so distant in history there must have grown a confidence such a catastrophe could never happen again: would never be allowed happen.

Towards the end of the fourth century the Visigoths sought sanctuary in the Roman Empire, fleeing from the advancing Huns, a Turkic nomadic people pushing westwards from the Asian steppes. The actions of the Huns unleashed a force Rome could not control, contributing to the empire's inevitable collapse. The emperor Valens agreed to settle the Visigoths in the Balkans, desolate territories that had been left to wither: they would re-cultivate the lands, provide recruits for the army and be a source of tax revenue. But Valens had begun a process, a course he had no choice but take, and one he could not have stopped even if he could see the future. It would cost him his life at the Battle of Adrianople when the Visigoths rebelled because he failed to meet their demands. The arrangement unleashed a chain of events catastrophic for the empire, showing that not even the greatest civilizations have full control over their own destiny – ultimately none. Its rulers had defined the boundaries of frontier, employed many of the 'barbarian' tribes in maintaining the authority of the Caesars. It appears they did not see what they were

in the midst of.

In the still heat of late summer 376 the black mass of Visigoth refugees descended on the northern bank of the River Danube, seeking to cross to a new life. Two hundred years of relative peace, Pax Romana, had come to an end. Another hundred years would pass before empire's final collapse.

2

In a cosmos ruled by all-powerful deities, or a single one – conveniently sharing our form, only larger – a ruler who had the blessing of such power, came from or became a deity, could claim authority to rule: fulfilling both the supernatural and natural order of existence. The power myth was confirmed. It would give empires and races the validation they are destined to reign in perpetuity, their rise to greatness preordained. Then in time mortals came to equal or supplant the divine, for the supernatural explanation for power is based on the need for power, the illusion, so by logical extension it leads to denial of the divine: that rational extension is also illusion because it too is based on premise power is real. The object of the competitor must be opposed, gut rejection that brings out the contrarian in the quest for power – even of the greatest competitor.

At momentous times in history people must have felt they were experiencing the incarnation of the myth, the dream magically coming to life, such the rapture and elation; power could not be an illusion: had to be real.

*

But the consequences of AD 376 should have truly shattered the myth of power, yet it lived on. Events far to the east, beyond the control of Rome, helped seal its fate: the westward pressure of the Huns. Myth gave Rome the presumption it would always prevail. It was easy to think destiny was involved: incomprehensible that a small community of cattle-rustlers living among the marches and

hills of Latium could by chance come to rule most of the known world. The infant twins, Remus and Romulus, could not have survived were it not for destiny, this visibly reinforced by the most powerful iconography: the she-wolf suckling the two human babies. Divine origins: their mother the vestal virgin – sacred duty to keep alight the eternal flame – was impregnated by Mars, God of War.

Virgil made Aeneas, the semi-divine Trojan prince, an ancestor of Romulus: creating a direct line to Rome's first imperial dynasty, the Julio-Claudians. The new-born civilization was promised that it would rule the world for all time, without limit.

*

In Greek myth Odysseus makes it home to Ithaca after ten years wandering, overcoming almost impossible odds to be united with his faithful wife Penelope. Disguised as a beggar only he can shoot the arrow through the line of axes: nothing factored for exhaustion, emotion – chance. Only a poet's imagination can create such confidence in an audience.

Alexander the Great slept with a copy of Homer's other epic, the Iliad, under his pillow, imitation of its heroes inspiring him to be reckless and impulsive. Those heroes were of a long-gone age, when humans were titans – the Age of Bronze. Alexander sought to emulate them as later leaders would him. Illustrious forebears thrust him to glory: his father claimed descent from Hercules and his mother from Trojan War hero Achilles, the warrior who inspired him most. Alexander and his army came to dominate the Eastern Mediterranean, defeated the mighty Persians and conquered all in their way as far as the Indus. Unstoppable victory could leave no doubt that reality and

myth were one. That illusion evaporated after Hydaspes. Not even the deception of alcohol could conquer that truth, as Alexander passed his last days in Babylon.

In its heyday Greek civilization still had enough myths that would allow it to overlook the folly of one day becoming embroiled in war between Rome and Carthage. They had fallen from the heights of Mount Olympus, from which Zeus had once swept down to rape and so sire a race of 'super humans'.

*

In the darkest days of exile the Jewish scriptures, in their most recent form, were put down on parchment. The Temple had been demolished. The Ark of the Covenant, that gold-gilded wooden chest that enshrined the tablets containing the commandments given to Moses, had been lost in the destruction. They had experienced the ravage of oppression before, and would again many times.

Comfortingly the Psalms spoke of a messianic king from the Davidic line, who would be sent by God to save his chosen people, a warrior who would have dominion 'from sea to sea, and from the river unto the ends of the earth.'

*

Humans convince themselves they are the masters of the narrative, know the ending of the story, are chosen or somehow endowed that the story's outcome can never be in doubt. They make the tale suit the needs of power.

Myth makes the weak superhumanly strong: an Arthur who can pull a stone from a rock or a Fergus Mac Léti wielding a blade sharp enough to slash the tops off

mountains, send Norse warriors to feast in Valhalla and escape the shame of living to old age. And the coward becomes brave. As a consequence, humans wrongly come to view themselves as, not the narrator, but that which is even greater.

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Power can only be understood through powerlessness – fear of it. Without power the individual has no control of external forces: human, natural or supernatural. And these seem so often to be scheming against the individual having that power. The struggle for power is the individual's, for which all else claimed to be important can be betrayed. Powerlessness exposes the individual to the terrors everyone flees from in search of safety and certainty: death the most fundamental. There is pain and the infliction of suffering, starvation and destitution as well as humiliation and the destruction of everything a person holds sacred. There's only one thing that is thought to protect against these – power

In the earliest primate community rises the dominant male, who sees the collective as serving his power. Other members express loyalty or hostility on how it serves their own interests. But the leader sees himself leader by his own strength: there can be no room for doubt. Opposition has to be crushed with relentless confidence – for all to see. Yet change cannot be prevented, beyond the power of that alpha male. Threat can come from beyond the boundary where security is set or from within, perhaps a conspiracy of both. Self-confidently he will cross every line when victory cheers him on: he will cross the line when there is no cheering, throttling warning voices inside his head. But opportunity will inevitably be presented to a

challenger. From the stick and stone, all civilizations – and their fate – is built upon the plight of that individual and the consciousness of being, waking to the awareness of surroundings. As sophistication grows motives other than power have to be attributed: otherwise risking the realization power is a delusion.

In their consciousness these hominids would've no reason to think the physical world was not conscious too: the earth and the rocks, the bush and forest, the sky and sun, the night and the moon – everything – those who had died and deities who controlled existence, invisible but suggestively everywhere. Hominids competed with the fierce creatures such as wild dogs and large long-toothed cats. Those animals dominated by strength, skilled hunting and opportunism. The animal world had to be respected, feared yet remorselessly defeated. The dominant hominid could not rule his dominion without ruling over all others as well. The gods, beasts and ghosts took on his form, and in time came to serve him.

With consciousness came duality. The fiery sky at dusk, when uneasy sleep cajoled, could have been the swift blaze that raced through the bush destroying all in its path. Or it could have been the smooth soporific rhythm creating a mood of calm and continuity as day turned to night – and dream. The full moon could have disguised the predator in shadow, favouring the nocturnal killer. Or it could have cast a magical scene, a pattern of light and dark that was part of a wider cycle – continuum. The sun did not have to scorch or reveal the prey to its attacker. It could gently warm and kiss with a motherly breeze: not carry a scent to the nostril of a beast that slubbers for flesh. Flakes of sunlight dancing on the water were mesmerizing, trancing towards an alternative awareness not lulling into a trap of

death.

Close with duality came the symbol, almost together: symbiotically blending, confusingly entwined. Like power the symbol in itself is a mere husk. All symbolism points to what is real – meaning. And as with power people can give it misplaced importance: that the symbolic object is meaning. Symbolism hints at meaning beyond – beyond narrative, ritual, sacred object or place, creature natural or fantastical, artefact from smallest figurine to the grandest piece of architecture, image and idea. Meaning does not come from symbolism: symbolism comes from meaning.

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Beyond is meaning. One part of the duality points back to it; the part not driven by power: the consequence of that part is all around, in the physical world. It is powerlessness that makes meaning clear, not power. By contrast meaning is amongst the intangible, the incorporeal.

Destiny and how the story ends can only be understood – sensed – through convergence, when people realize meaning is harmony, revealed succinctly in the truthful recognition of discord – the opposite. It is identified in the real use of symbol, beauty, coming together of past, present and future – desired state. The nearest the human spiritual journey will get to the eternal and divine, in this life only to be glimpsed as human intellect can get no nearer, is composed in a single feeling: love.