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History 177

By 1902, Theodore Roosevelt had been the President of the United States for only a few months. But he had been an advocate of a strong navy for some years already. Roosevelt was one of the few who saw the necessity of a powerful navy in a shrinking world and strongly believed, as he repeated the words of George Washington, that “to be prepared for war is the most effectual means to promote peace.”ⁱ By the end of 1902 both President Roosevelt and Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany would find out just how effectual preparedness was for promoting peace. With the emergence of the crisis in Venezuela in December of 1902, the New World faced a grave danger from the Old World Empire of Germany- a situation President Roosevelt knew he must remedy. The ultimatum threatening American military intervention that President Roosevelt delivered to the German Kaiser destroyed the German vision of establishing a colony in Venezuela and forced Germany to accept third party arbitration as an end to the crisis.

German economic intervention in the countries of South America, and particularly Venezuela, began well before the advent of the crisis of 1902. Even before Theodore Roosevelt and Wilhelm II had been born, Germany had ninety-eight firms conducting business in South America.ⁱⁱ However, the late nineteenth century would not be kind to the nation of Venezuela and would considerably damage its economic relations with Europe.

The history of Venezuela from...1870 until the departure of Cipriano Castro in 1908 was one of civil wars, foreign invasions, fiscal chaos, and occasional foreign blockades. It was invaded no less than twenty-two times by Columbia between 1859 and 1901. And six bloody internecine squabbles between 1892 and 1902 forced Venezuela to endure 437 military engagements at a cost of 20,000 lives

and 680 million Bolivars; the national debt doubled to over 200 million Bolivars.ⁱⁱⁱ

Venezuela faced myriad internal problems in the second half of the nineteenth century and “German-Venezuelan relations began to sour by 1895.”^{iv} The country was “battered by years of revolution and saddled with a fiery dictator” and “was neither paying its bills nor compensating foreigners for damages suffered as a result of domestic turmoil.”^v It is estimated that the country owed something to the effect of sixty-two million Bolivars to Great Britain and Germany who were proving to be an “impatient consortium” on the receiving end.^{vi} By the end of 1902, Germany, looking to be repaid for “contract impairment, destruction of property, and non-payment of services rendered”^{vii} allied itself with Great Britain to end the wait and settle the matter on their own terms. The two resolved to send a “multinational armada” to Venezuela “until the debts were paid off.”^{viii} Thus, “in December 1902, Germany, England, and Italy imposed a naval blockade on Venezuela to address their grievances.”^{ix} Immediately, flags were raised within the Roosevelt administration as to the true intentions of the European powers, more specifically the Germans however. The institution of the naval blockade on Venezuela was seen as an encroachment on the Monroe Doctrine and an attempt at the colonization of South America by Wilhelm II and Germany. The true intentions and the need for American intervention can easily be discerned from a rich Prussian tradition of militarism and expansion, along with recent acts of global aggression by the German Empire.

The beginning of the Prussian tradition of militarism and expansion dates back well before the establishment of a unified Germany. In the second half of the sixteenth century rulers were still “earnestly caution[ed]...against any striving for ‘pagan’ war glory...which gives rise only to manslaughter, murder, arson, rapine, violation of women

and girls, and disaster to rich and poor alike.”^x The urge to avoid war in favor of peace would change in a short time however. “A new breed of princes was rising, much hungrier for secular glory and even prepared to subordinate religious faith to political expediency...The great dream of these German princes was to rival the splendor of the court at Versailles, and that required military spectacles.”^{xi} Thus, the stage was set for the Prussian territories to become the world power they had the ability to be. All that was lacking at this point was that one ruler to realize this potential and take the next step.

From this tradition of centuries there suddenly and unexpectedly leaped in meteoric trajectory the military genius of King Frederic II, the first to carry the grand style of European power politics into the world of the petty German principalities. It was he who first put the Prussian army on the road to military glory. Only under him did it begin to become known as the best army in the world.^{xii}

Frederic the Great, as he would come to be called, would be that man. Frederic took the ‘petty principalities’ of Prussia and came up with the ‘best army in the world.’ Under Frederic II, “war seemed to have become Prussia’s proper element. Peace was no more than a breathing-space for mustering new forces against the enemy without.”^{xiii} Frederic established the military tradition that would flow throughout the veins of Prussia and a unified Germany, up to and past the Venezuela crisis, until the fall of the Third Reich. As Theodore Roosevelt told his friend William Roscoe Thayer during The Great War, “Germany under Frederic the Great had ‘stolen Silesia’ and ‘dismembered Poland’ and, in more recent decades, ‘garroted’ Denmark, forced a ‘wicked’ war on Austria, ‘trapped France by lies into another war,’ and only recently ‘wiped its hands, dripping with blood, from the Chinese.’”^{xiv} Certainly a country with such a tradition and history of war and expansion would not simply seek a quick resolution to the crisis in Venezuela, pick up, and leave. South America could be a new place to carve up and take possession of, just as

the German Empire did with Africa at the Berlin Conference or in China only years before.

Less than twenty years before the rise of the conflict in Venezuela, Germany, among other European nations, was seeking to advance the territorial gains of its empire throughout the African continent. The German government under Otto Von Bismarck even took the liberty of hosting the conference to formally “carve up Africa and its resources”^{xv} between thirteen European powers. Germany was one of the leaders at the Berlin conference of 1884 as she “grabbed Southwest Africa (Namibia) and German East Africa (Tanzania, Rwanda, and Burundi), Togoland, part of Cameroon and the border areas of Benin.”^{xvi} Although the German empire gained a considerable amount of territory, the rest of Africa was shut out to German colonization as every part of the continent went to some European power. If the German empire wanted to continue its expansion around the globe she would have to look elsewhere. Perhaps South America would be the next continent to ‘carve up’ for its resources. And what possibly might have worried President Roosevelt greatest was the most recent example of what could easily happen to Venezuela. This, of course, was the recent German possession of the Kiaochow territory in China.

On 1 November 1897, two members of a German missionary society were murdered in the village of Changkiachwang, in south Shantung.^{xvii}

News of the assassination reached Berlin November 6. As the protector of the Steyl mission, it was Germany’s obligation to intervene to secure satisfaction for the crime and assurances for the future. This she was altogether willing to do, and she was ready to act with a decisive stroke.^{xviii}

The assassination of the missionary members was the perfect excuse for Germany to become involved in the Shantung province, which contained the port city of Kiaochow.

Kiaochow was the perfect place to satisfy German desires for a port in Far Eastern waters and had been one of those considered by the German government for some time. All that was needed was some reason to become involved in the region. The German government's reason was legitimate however, as they were responsible for protection of the Steyl mission. "This in turn not only granted to Germany the right to act, but also imposed the duty to do so when the missionaries were assassinated."^{xxix} As it was, the German government ordered the Eastern Asiatic Cruiser Squadron to "Proceed immediately to Kiaochow with the whole squadron, seize suitable points and villages, and, in such manner as may appear best to you, compel full satisfaction by the greatest possible application of energy."^{xxx} The murder of the missionaries allowed the German government to seize the bay city of Kiaochow and then begin negotiating for reparations with the Chinese government. The demands "were of two classes: the usual satisfactions for the murders; and the demands for the continued possession of Kiaochow and for the securing of concessions for the development of the interior of Shantung, these latter demands of course having no connection with the murders."^{xxxi} After a German council held in Berlin and a number of attempts at procrastination on the part of the Chinese government the matter was settled. The German minister to China appeared before the Chinese and "in the form of an ultimatum...asserted that Kiaochow was a German port and that it would remain so. Further negotiations were therefore unnecessary. He demanded the immediate acceptance of the proposed treaty."^{xxxii} As it turned out, the small incident of the murders and the temporary seizure of Kiaochow would lead to a ninety-nine year lease of the port by the German government. The Kiaochow incident demonstrates just how easily a small squabble over two murders, or perhaps foreign debt,

could turn into a colonizing movement. Based on the recent German activity around the globe, it would have been foolhardy to treat the Venezuelan crisis without caution as it could have easily turned into a German colony in South America.

President Roosevelt and his administration knew all too well the threat that Venezuela faced and, in fact, the assurance of a ‘temporary’ occupation by the Kaiser reminded Roosevelt specifically of the Kiaochow incident.^{xxiii} In addition, with “the sun beginning to set” on the German colonies in Africa,^{xxiv} Roosevelt could be sure that no such thing as a temporary occupation existed in the plans of the Kaiser. Even if the Kaiser did have plans only to occupy Venezuelan waters until the debts were paid off, it would have turned into more based on the simple fact that Castro and the Venezuelan government did not have the ability to pay off the debts. “President Castro had no money.”^{xxv} As Rear Admiral Henry Clay Taylor noted in a letter to the President in late November of 1902, “Venezuela...could offer nothing but territory, or she could mortgage her revenue in such a way as to place herself in complete political dependency on Germany.”^{xxvi} The similarities between the Venezuelan affair and the Kiaochow incident are striking. In both cases Germany had a substantial reason for intervention in the area and in both cases the German government could seek demands that could not be met, ultimately leading to reparations in terms of territory. The land that Venezuela could offer Germany would be more than just a new colony to tack on to the empire however. The ultimate consequence of a German occupation of Venezuela would mean the establishment of a German naval base in South America. The construction of the Panama Canal by the American Government demanded that the German Government establish a South American base. A German base in South America “could provide a coaling station

for both merchant and naval vessels, and could serve as a center from which to harass the eastern terminus of the canal, when completed, in case of war.”^{xxvii} Again, just as the Germans seized Kiaochow in order to obtain a Far Eastern port, the seizure of Venezuela would be the first step toward establishing a naval base in South America, one the Germans thought crucial for a number of reasons. Roosevelt saw that the only way to deter the Germans from establishing a colony and naval base in Venezuela was to threaten American military intervention. Even though the Kaiser assured Roosevelt that the German nation had “no desire to establish footholds in the Western hemisphere,”^{xxviii} the blockade of Venezuela would be seen as an encroachment on the principles laid out in the Monroe Doctrine and would have to be put down.

In December of 1823 President James Monroe laid out a number of principles regarding the intrusion of the Western hemisphere by the powers of the Old World, principles that would later become known as the Monroe Doctrine. The Monroe Doctrine stated “the Western Hemisphere was no longer open to colonization by European powers; that the United States would regard any attempt at such colonization to be ‘dangerous to our peace and safety’.”^{xxix} The blockade could be seen as both a colonizing movement, as it appeared despite reassurances, and, in turn, a threat to the security of the United States. The blockade would be a threat to American interests in both South America and at home. But while the doctrine stated no European powers were allowed to meddle in the affairs of the Western hemisphere, there was really no statement of enforcement. The doctrine did not grant the United States the authority to deter European powers and was largely considered “at most a hollow threat”^{xxx} throughout Germany. As Otto Von Bismarck put it in two accounts in 1897-1898, “Monroe’s epistle [was] ‘a species of

arrogance peculiarly American and inexcusable,' a 'presumptuous idea' that even Washington had been unable consistently to interpret and apply. [Bismarck] demanded that Monroe's 'insolent dogma' be revoked 'in plain daylight'.^{xxxix} It was also noted in Germany "the Monroe Doctrine has not become an international law, to which the European nations are tied."^{xxxii} The German attitude of the Monroe Doctrine was one of blatant disregard. The Kaiser knew the doctrine rested on the might of the American military and was willing to test that might in order to gain Venezuela. President Roosevelt, "a 'Monroe Doctrinaire' obsessed with the idea of getting the Old World out of the New,"^{xxxiii} was just as willing. In what would be a prelude to the Roosevelt Corollary,¹ the President would give the Kaiser two ends to the Venezuelan crisis: accept third-party arbitration or face American military intervention.

On 25 November 1902, "Germany officially informed the [U.S.] State Department that they intended to proceed against Venezuela," and later, on 7 December, "initiating 'specific measures' to satisfy their claims."^{xxxiv} Just as this was taking place President Roosevelt ordered Admiral George Dewey and his fleet in the Caribbean "ready to move at an hour's notice."^{xxxv} The following day, Roosevelt, "a commander in chief who accomplished much of his grand strategy in silence and secrecy,"^{xxxvi} gave a secret ultimatum to Kaiser Wilhelm II, through the German ambassador Theodor von Holleben. The reason for the secret diplomacy of President Roosevelt lies in the character of the man he was dealing with.

¹ In messages to Congress in 1904 and 1905, President Theodore Roosevelt proclaimed what would become known as the "Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine." "This is essentially a statement that the United States, as the dominant power in the Western Hemisphere, has a responsibility for the maintenance of peace in the hemisphere," (*U.S. Latin American Policy, 1823-1965. Congressional Digest*. November 1965, Vol. 44, Issue 11, p. 258).

He [Roosevelt] saw a waywardness in Wilhelm. The Kaiser was vain, coarse, romantic, often foolish, xenophobic in general and anti-Semitic in particular, given to hoarse shouts of 'ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Gott!' His bouts of rage were so violent as to make onlookers physically sick...TR understood that in negotiating with Wilhelm he must at all times remember the importance of show-or, in diplomatic parlance, 'face.' It would be foolhardy to humiliate a person like that in the Caribbean.^{xxxvii}

The Kaiser was a powerful and edgy leader, the type of leader that would go to war with the United States if it meant preserving the honor of himself and his homeland. In fact, "strategists on the Wilhelmstrasse were working in the deepest secrecy on a plan for the possible invasion of the United States."^{xxxviii} Roosevelt knew he had to keep his negotiations behind the curtains while at the same time being forceful enough for the Kaiser to understand. Ten days had been given as time for the Kaiser to decide which option to choose and it was, in response, insisted upon that Germany sought debt collection only. It was then that the blockade turned violent, becoming an even greater violation of the Monroe Doctrine and threat to American security. On "9 December Four Venezuelan gunboats were seized by the allies [Germany, Britain, and Italy], and three of them were destroyed by Germany...If Wilhelm was this willing to lay violent hands on Venezuelan shipping, what price Venezuelan real estate?"^{xxxix} In turn, Castro and the Venezuelan government specifically sought out the help of the United States and requested arbitration. The President again inquired about accepting the proposed ultimatum and again received a 'no.' Roosevelt reminded Ambassador von Holleben that the Kaiser be aware he "was 'very definitely' threatening war." When von Holleben declined to accept such language "the president replied that in that case, he must advance his ultimatum by twenty-four hours."^{xl} Interestingly, there was no written record of the meeting with the ambassador, showing Roosevelt understood the importance of 'face' to

the Kaiser. While Roosevelt's message was loud and clear the Kaiser could still settle the matter "without evidence of being coerced."^{xli} The German Ambassador now began to realize the American threat of action was not "mere Rooseveltian bluster" and that the crisis was "a matter of extreme urgency."^{xlii} The Wilhelmstrasse would still not agree to arbitration and less than twenty-four hours before the deadline Dewey's squadron was headed for Trinidad, only sixty miles from Venezuela. It now seemed that perhaps President Roosevelt really was serious about the possibility of American intervention in the crisis. That night, von Holleben and other German diplomats met in New York and urgently cabled Berlin about the matter. It seems that at this point the Kaiser may have finally realized what was at stake and where Germany would be headed after midnight.

Roosevelt was never to know exactly in what terms von Holleben transmitted the American threat of war, only that the threat got through- on a night when the transatlantic cable became so electric with communications that even the *Times* of London was denied access. The evidence suggests that von Holleben's cable was burned after reading, in approved German security fashion. On 17 December, the Reichstag decided to accept arbitration...TR's deadline passed in peace.^{xliii}

As it was, the Kaiser ultimately accepted arbitration to end the Venezuelan crisis. The Kaiser had no choice but to submit to the ultimatum from President Roosevelt, avoiding war between Germany and America.

The ultimatum that President Roosevelt delivered to Kaiser Wilhelm II did more than just put an end to the crisis in Venezuela. Not only did the ultimatum force the Kaiser to accept arbitration, but it also destroyed the German vision of a colony in South America, particularly in Venezuela, and proved American power could back the principles of the Monroe Doctrine. It would be extremely naïve to think that a country such as Germany, with its rich expansionist tradition and recent colonial acquisitions

around the globe, would have collected the debts from Venezuela and left. The Kaiser and the German government undoubtedly sought to not only collect their debts, but establish a colony and naval base in South America too. The Germans would certainly not have left without some coercion. Without the ultimatum from President Roosevelt, the Kaiser would never have accepted arbitration and there would most likely have been a Venezuela ruled from Berlin.

Notes

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- ⁱ Theodore Roosevelt, speech to the Naval War College, Newport, RI, 2 June 1897
- ⁱⁱ Herwig, Holger H. Germany's Vision of Empire in Venezuela 1871-1914. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1986. p. 17
- ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid. p. 81
- ^{iv} Ibid. p. 82
- ^v Mitchell, Nancy. *The Height of the German Challenge: The Venezuela Blockade, 1902-3*. Diplomatic History. Spring 1996, Vol. 20, Issue 2, p. 186
- ^{vi} Morris, Edmund. *A Matter of Extreme Urgency: Theodore Roosevelt, Wilhelm II, and the Venezuela Crisis of 1902*. Naval War College Review. Spring 2002, Vol. LV, No. 2, p. 74
- ^{vii} Herwig, Holger H. p. 80
- ^{viii} Morris, Edmund. p. 75
- ^{ix} Mitchell, Nancy. p. 186
- ^x Ritter, Gerhard. The Sword and the Scepter: The Problem of Militarism in Germany; Volume 1: The Prussian Tradition 1740-1890. University of Miami Press, 1969. p. 16
- ^{xi} Ibid. p. 17
- ^{xii} Ibid. p. 18
- ^{xiii} Ibid. p. 19
- ^{xiv} Renshan Jr. Edward J. The Lion's Pride: Theodore Roosevelt and His Family in Peace and War. New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998. p. 103
- ^{xv} Sankore, Rotimi. *Africa: The 1884 scramble was for resources to develop Europe*. New African. October 2005, Issue 444, p. 22
- ^{xvi} Ibid. p. 22
- ^{xvii} Norem, Ralph A. Kiaochow Leased Territory. Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1936. p. 7
- ^{xviii} Ibid. p. 7
- ^{xix} Ibid. p. 7
- ^{xx} Ibid. p. 29
- ^{xxi} Ibid. p. 35
- ^{xxii} Ibid. p. 39
- ^{xxiii} Morris, Edmund. p. 76
- ^{xxiv} Ibid. p. 76
- ^{xxv} Ibid. p. 75
- ^{xxvi} Ibid. p. 75
- ^{xxvii} Herwig, Holger H. p. 143
- ^{xxviii} Morris, Edmund. p. 75
- ^{xxix} Herwig, Holger H. p. 178
- ^{xxx} Morris, Edmund. p. 76
- ^{xxxi} Herwig, Holger H. p. 197
- ^{xxxii} Ibid. p. 196
- ^{xxxiii} Morris, Edmund. p. 74
- ^{xxxiv} Ibid. p. 78, 79
- ^{xxxv} Ibid. p. 79
- ^{xxxvi} Ibid. p. 74
- ^{xxxvii} Ibid. p. 80
- ^{xxxviii} Ibid. p. 76
- ^{xxxix} Ibid. p. 81
- ^{xl} Ibid. p. 82
- ^{xli} Ibid. p. 82
- ^{xlii} Ibid. p. 82, 83
- ^{xliii} Ibid. p. 84