



great powers of Europe was partly produced by the even distribution of power between them during the later nineteenth century: a balance eventually disturbed by the enormous growth of German strength. But it was a consequence also of the fact that the great powers had learned a self-restraint in their dealings with one another which would have been unthinkable only a century before. Europe, in short, seemed to have become more civilised. By the beginning of the twentieth century a generation had grown up which, for the first time in European history, had begun to think of warfare as a thing of the past. Even when Europe finally went to war in 1914, many believed that they

were doing so for the last time, that they were fighting a war to end all wars.

The alliance system

There had been no war between major European powers since 1871. The Franco-Prussian War, concluded in that year, had been one of the turning points in the history of nineteenth-century Europe. It had ended two centuries of French supremacy on the continent of Europe and, at the same time, enabled Bismarck to complete the unification of Germany under Prussian leadership. The war changed Bismarck himself from poacher to gamekeeper. For a decade

Above: Europe on the eve of the First World War. Germany and Austria-Hungary had been allies since 1879. But even at the beginning of the twentieth century there had been few more unlikely European alignments than a Triple Entente of England, France, and Russia. Its formation was made possible only by the ineptness of German diplomacy.