

Does Britain bear the primary responsibility for World War I?

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ANON, NOV 13 2010

“Britain bears the primary responsibility for the outbreak of European War in 1914.” Discuss.

The sheer chaos of an era said to have required a “daily calendar to catch the sense of rising tension between all the capitals”[1], makes it seem nonsensical to ascribe substantial blame to a country such as Britain. Historians have frequently attributed Britain’s pre-war persona as pivotal to why the debate over its responsibility has largely “been desultory and muted”[2]. In an arena of both political, ethical intransigence and military antagonism, its liberal, democratic mantra and seemingly stringent policy of non-intervention, would surely exempt it from the seemingly inevitable descent into conflict by August 1914. However it is this notion, of a naïve, conciliatory approach that provides this thesis with a fundamental platform to attribute a degree of accountability to the British for the catastrophe that unfolded.

It is questionable as to why a country, with such nautical and economic dominance, failed to intervene earlier and suppress evidently hostile actors in the international community. Sir Arthur Nicolson, the permanent undersecretary of the Foreign Office at the outbreak of war in 1914, perfectly forecasted the consequences of British non-action in the European affairs that would escalate so rapidly, “Should we waver now, we shall rue the day later”[3]. Apologist Zara Steiner suggests a preoccupation with domestic affairs, notably uprisings in Ulster, meant that Britain, “Totally immersed in Irish affairs”[4], had problems of an immediate significance to deal with. However, in context, this shouldn’t have been so intrusive upon foreign diplomacy, and many of the key belligerents also suffered from ‘home troubles’ (for instance Russia’s ‘revolution’ of 1905). The subsequent uncertainty created through Britain’s position probably made a continental war more rather than less likely[5]. It is for such a reason this essay will focus largely upon the director of British overtures, Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey, as culpable for Britain’s unyielding diplomatic paralysis to events deteriorating across the Channel. This said, the other substantial themes, such as; the German pursuit of Weltpolitik and the general war preparation amongst the other Great Powers, significantly outweigh the problems caused by Britain’s non-role. Each will be given due recognition and thus go some way to exempt Britain from the ‘primary responsibility’ intimated in this essay’s title.

Napoleon Bonaparte famously stated that “A leader is a dealer in hope”, and it’s with this premise that Sir Edward Grey can be judged to have failed, spectacularly. As the British Foreign Secretary between 1905-16, Grey virtually orchestrated Britain’s pre-war international relations, both official and unofficial. It is widely documented that his personality lacked the great courage and vision intrinsically required of a man in his immense position[6]. These characteristics translated into ambiguous British policy, with a half-hearted attachment to its allies and a prolonged, irrational stance towards its adversaries, when an extended arm to the Central Powers would have done much to reduce the rigidity of matters. For instance Germany and Britain made positive steps on the previously spiralling naval construction, with the Kaiser, in writing, firmly denying an aim ‘to challenge British naval supremacy[7]’. Additionally, Grey’s inconsistent loyalty to the French and Russians described as “solely provisional and non-committal”[8] can be deemed as self-serving. Earlier agreements, such as the Entente with France in 1904, can be viewed as a measure to protect colonial interests and consequently obscured the contentious issues of the day.

Such conduct effectively ruled out an understanding with the Germans[9], leading to increased polarisation, providing

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Germany with the margin of doubt[10] to justify their so-called 'encirclement paranoia'. This was obstructive to real peace initiatives, such as the Haldane mission of 1912, that promised much, but foundered on the fact Britain could not guarantee the "benevolent neutrality"[11] that Chancellor Bethmann was seeking.

The remaining days before war broke out go further to condemn Grey and thus Britain, in their role and subsequent responsibility. It seems that merely being able to comprehend events unfolding was a difficult task for the divisive Liberal Cabinet, who only by the 24th of July had become "seriously worried"[12] about developments. It is worth noting fairly bluntly at this point, Arch-Duke Franz Ferdinand had been assassinated just under a month before. Grey's lack of urgency is typified by his actions between 28-31 July, where he believed that he could instigate 'some sort of joint mediation' before setting off for his usual weekend's fishing in Hampshire"[13]. By this point, Serbia had already ordered the mobilisation of its troops and Russia had arranged for its troops to be stationed on the Russo-Austrian frontier[14] and can therefore be seen as typically ignorant of a man who lacked the foresight and ingenuity to keep pace with events that would transpire. Such behaviour was typical of the gridlock that existed within the British Cabinet and in allowing 'decisions to be taken by the soldiers'[15], they must bare some responsibility for war being declared by all major powers in the following six days.

Nevertheless, it would be generalist to suggest Britain's impartiality was contrived. Its political agenda was blighted by domestic troubles, specifically in Ulster, where a sectarian battle was beginning to emerge over whether it would be governed by Dublin[16], or Britain. The Parliament Act of 1911 certainly portrays how the Commons was preoccupied with overruling the vote of the Lords. Furthermore, Steiner has described Britain as an ill prepared country on the verge of civil war[17], suggesting such troubles shouldn't be downplayed as a factor in Britain's European role in this period. In addition, the diplomatic stance can be seen as one of appropriate restraint and a bastion of calm in the face of multiple provocative acts, not least from Germany, whose decision to send a gunboat to Agadir in 1911 could have easily started a military conflict with France, Britain's primary ally. Diplomatic and strategic commitment, with a practical and political non-commitment[18], whilst certainly not ideal to quelling the disorder that existed, has to be comparatively viewed as peaceful, particularly when studying the actions of Germany and Austria Hungary.

German imperialism, under the banner of Weltmachtpolitik, provided the framework for the basic tensions in the entire pre war period. Various endorsements by the upper echelons of the German hierarchy, including the Kaiser himself, declaring a desire for a 'Napoleonic supremacy'[19], confirm that this was embedded into the German mindset and approach towards international affairs. It must be reiterated that this was not simply rhetoric of an upstart who wanted their 'place in the sun', Weltpolitik became more pronounced with time and Fritz Fischer attributes such dogma to the starting point for Germany 'to stake its claims all over the world[20]. Promoted by the pan-Germanist elites, it primarily emerged through the Triple Alliance, which, through providing access to new trade routes and a platform for colonial expansion, can be legitimately viewed as a clear basis for ambitions to become a fledgling world power[21]. Secondly, it became the ideological root for military expansion, most evident in the Tirpitz's North Sea 'Risk Fleet', deliberately designed to antagonise Britain in 1906. Finally, it transpired as a physical threat to the international community in the port of Agadir in 1911, but also in a passive aggressive manner, through the infamous blank cheque given to Austria Hungary. This had the purpose of removing Serbian demands for autonomy, whom Austria had assumed played a collaborative role in the assassination, based on a supposed association with Gavrilo Principe, the assassin. Conversely, certain historians, such as Hans-Ulrich Wehler, lament Germany's behaviour as an attempt to 'escape forwards' from domestic struggles, with the Chancellor Bulow convinced that only a spectacular success in foreign policy could restore the popularity of the Kaiser[22]. However, such a view does not deny that Germany's conduct was overtly aggressive, and thus does not diminish the responsibility for their part in the anxiety and tension that culminated in war.

Furthermore, Weltpolitik can be seen as the origin of widespread anti-German sentiment amongst public opinion of the other great powers. In France, the defeat in the 1871 Franco-Prussian War had already created 'l'obsession de la revanche'[23], and German plans for domination would do little to quell such emotions. Distaste for Wilhelmine policy was rabid in the British Press, with The Times 'demanding a strong stand and participation in the coming war'[24]. Germany's proposed violation of Belgium's neutrality had drastically altered the mindset of the British public, setting "the nation on fire from sea to sea"[25], leaving their representative Cabinet with other little option but to act. Such a

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war-hungry mentality emerged extremely belatedly in Britain. Only a month before the great sense of distance was felt very clearly between themselves and events transpiring in the Balkans, "We care as little for Belgrade as Belgrade for Manchester"[26]. Whilst it should be noted public opinion does not necessarily cement war plans into action, perceived war plans certainly cement public opinion, therefore to determine responsibility, recognition of the major powers' war aims is crucial.

German war plans bear the most culpability in terms of motive and alignment to subsequent actions. The most damning evidence to qualify such a statement is the fundamental nature of the Schlieffen Plan. The Plan is an outright pursuit of domination. An elementary knowledge of the Plan shows that, in full knowledge of French defences, Schlieffen proposed attacking France through Holland, Belgium and Luxembourg, defeating the French in the 6 weeks it would take the Russians to mobilize[27]. Whilst critics, such as Zuber, suggest the memorandum was a messy draft and did not resemble the usual format for war plans[28], it was quite clearly, despite its informal nature, a concrete project for the defeat of France in 1906[29]. This is not to say the Schlieffen Plan was the only reason subsequent War Guilt should be heaped upon Germany, but as a keystone of the Weltpolitik movement, it is a majorly condemning factor.

So as to not make this thesis a diatribe solely against German policy in the period building up to war, it is essential to note that there were a variety of agendas played out by the other Great Powers which would have contributed to exacerbating tensions, if not necessarily finalising the motions of war. For instance, it is said that the war plans of Imperial Russia 'bore a special burden'[30] for the succeeding events of August 1914. An obsession with regaining Constantinople, centred on the trade opportunities of the Turkish Straits, equated to sour relations with Austria Hungary, with both requiring a strong sphere of influence surrounding the borders of their equivalently unstable empires. Furthermore, a Russian determination to uphold the Slavic autonomy and influence in the region, set a racial precedent to the tensions. This provoked the Germany hierarchy, notably Von Moltke, into recognizing, quite explicitly, a probable war between "Slavdom and Germandom"[31]. Russia was also the first to mobilize its troops fully, and this ultimately halted almost all forms of diplomacy, with the French following suit by increasing their own mandatory conscription period. As for Britain; although they had a significantly less public approach to preparing for war, there were still some considerably formal meetings, such as that of the Committee of Imperial Defence (CID) which had more or less decided what form support for France would take in the event of German provocation[32]. However, this still has a reactionary undertone and therefore is not as reprehensible as the infamous German War Council meeting of 1912 where von Moltke states "I consider a war inevitable—the sooner, the better"[33]. It must be noted Britain never attributed herself to such a view, regardless of the inherent antipathy felt towards its noisy neighbour. When Grey, 'the great appeaser' stated "The lamps are going out all over Europe", there was none of von Moltke's seemingly perverse pleasure behind in what was clearly his tragic belief that "we shall not see them lit again in our time".

This thesis has largely attempted to dismiss the notion that Britain was primarily to blame for the European descent to war in 1914. Eyebrows should rightly be raised over Britain's non-interventionist policy despite unconcealed German desires to be the main protagonist in the theatre of Global issues. This stance translated into uncertainty and chaos in the arena, lesser countries' temperaments could have been quite easily contained by a showing of force by the sole superpower of the era, potentially leading to rapprochement between the confrontational nations. However, the burden of war can not be placed upon a country without any real concrete war plans, and this is where Germany stands alone. Weltpolitik, at its very core, was inflammatory and designed to challenge the existing pecking order. Despite the quarrels of July 1914, the latest in a string of a turbulent Baltic region, it was the German long term desires for hegemony that pushed sleeping giants, such as Russia, to full scale mobilization and thus triggered the unavoidable cataclysm that would follow.

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Notes

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