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Why Great Britain Entered the Great War
By Norman Simms



Throughout the Twentieth Century and into the Twenty-First, many causes have been proposed for why Great Britain entered World War I (the Great War) on the side of France and Russia. Extensive research has indicated that the three most probable causes were the naval arms race, the German atrocities committed in occupied territories, and the violation of Belgium neutrality. Of these three, the violation of Belgium neutrality is most strongly supported as the ultimate reason why England committed itself militarily to the Entente.

The book, “Twenty-Five Years” was written by Sir Edward Grey (official title: Viscount Grey of Fallodon, K.G.) who served as Secretary of Foreign Relations of Great Britain from 1892 to 1895, again from 1905 to 1916, and died in 1933. Grey’s two-volume autobiography was first published in 1925 and focuses on the political and diplomatic aspects of the war. It is unique because of Grey’s governmental position prior to and during the war and because it was written outside the context of the World War II.

Grey first discusses the naval arms race as a possible cause of England’s eventual decision to enter the war. For most of the Nineteenth Century, Great Britain had been involved in a naval arms race with France and Russia. Britain had relied primarily on its navy to enact its foreign policy and maintained a policy in which it kept its fleet bigger than the next two biggest navies combined. Prior naval conflicts with France and Russia led England’s Head of Foreign Relations, Arthur Neville Chamberlain, to offer an alliance to Germany in a speech given at Leicester on 30 November 1899 (almost five years prior to England’s declaration of war against Germany.) His justification was that England had the strongest navy in the world, Germany had the greatest army in the world, and the fleet and army couldn’t fight; thus an alliance between the two would allow both sides to “maintain their own interests and keep Europe in order[, but]...the suggestion for an alliance with [England] was coldly received in Germany;”¹ consequently, Germany embarked on the creation of a great navy, England sought alliance with Japan (Japan navy’s was the dominant power in the Asiatic oceans,) and England sought peace with France (who was allied with Russia.) The friendship between England and France freed England from concern over the French and Russian navies. In

¹Grey, Edward, Sir. *25 Years*. NY: 1925. Fredrick Astokes Comp. Pg 220

addition, it opened up communication between the General Staff and the Admiralty of both countries that allowed discussion concerning plans to deal with a possible attack on either country; however, England was careful to ensure that the discussions did not obligate either country to fight if one was attacked. Despite its navy being stretched thin, the British navy had two things going in its favor. First, by chance, the navy had been fully mobilized for its annual naval maneuvers which finished about a week prior to the declaration of war (June 25) and Winston Churchill alertly held off the order to demobilize; thus he had a fully mobilized fleet as war broke out on the Continent. Second, as result of the French-British friendship and naval discussions, during the previous two years France had sent its fleet to protect French and English interests (specifically commerce) in the Mediterranean. Consequently, France's northern and western coast lacked naval protection and England was free to concentrate her naval forces elsewhere. While this placed an obligation (on English honor at the very least) on England, it maintained a position of neutrality by not officially agreeing to protect the French coast, and when war was imminent, to obtain an agreement with Germany not to attack these coasts as long as England remained neutral.² Grey concludes that the naval arms race influenced the decision but was not the decisive cause

Grey's next major discussion is on Belgian neutrality as a possible cause for Great Britain's entrance into the war on the side of France and Russia. When Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria and his wife were killed by a member of the Black Hand Organization (Serbian extremist group that sought unification of all lands in the Austro-Hungarian Empire that were inhabited by Serbs) on Austro-Hungarian soil, general world opinion was with Austria-Hungary in its desire to seek justice. Austria issued demands that even German officials acknowledged as unrealistic; consequently, a single act in the Balkans drew all of Europe into a war that encompassed the entire European continent. Most British politicians were unwilling to get involved in a war that had nothing to do with England. Great Britain had carefully avoided treaties that would require it to go to war if the other country was attacked. It was signatory to only two such treaties, the Anglo Japanese Alliance and the treaty to defend Belgian neutrality. The only obligation England had in Europe was to defend Belgium if it was invaded. When the first German soldier set foot on Belgian soil, England had an obligation to declare war on Germany. It was not a question of imperialism, economics, or ideological differences; it was keeping a promise that was made when England signed the Treaty of London in 1831. Germany committed the one action that guaranteed Great Britain's entrance into the war. Grey concludes that this violation was what ultimately caused England to declare war on Germany.³

"Guns of August" was written by Barbara W. Tuchman and published in 1962. It eventually won the Pulitzer Prize (as would another one of her books). Tuchman was an amateur historian who meticulously researched her topic. This style can be seen on the emphasis placed military strategy tactics instead of abstract concepts (ex. significance of the war on modern English foreign policy) which are the trademark of the professional.

Tuchman first discusses the naval arms race. What convinced Germany to reject Great Britain's offer of her navy? She had no need of a navy, as Tuchman states, "As a land power, Germany could have fought any possible combination of continental powers

²Ibid, 220.

³Ibid, 220.

without interruption of her seaborne supplies as long as Britain...remained neutral” and with Britain as an ally England would not only remain neutral, but would prevent any other navy from interrupting these supplies.⁴ The fault for this can be found not in Germany but in America. The American admiral, Alfred T. Mahan, wrote the book “The Influence of Sea Power on History”, in 1890 and “demonstrated that he who controls communications by sea controls his fate” and that “the master of the seas is master of the situation.”⁵ This book influenced “the impressionable [Kaiser] Wilhelm,” and convinced him that Germany needed to be a major player on the seas as well as on the land. Germany had a great industrial capacity and quickly sought to catch up with Britain, yet war was only five years away. Great Britain had little respect for Germany’s naval force prior to 1914. In 1912, Lord of the Navy, Winston Churchill, referred to it as a luxury fleet, but on the eve of war disregard had turned to strong apprehension. By 1914, Germany had a large modern fleet that ranged from massive Dreadnaughts to the latest naval weapon, the submarine. The British Fleet was still superior in size and firepower, but it was spread thin. The multitude of tasks that consisted of guarding against an invasion of the British Isles, escorting the BEF (British Expeditionary Force) safely to the continent, transporting troops from India (to reinforce the Regular Army,) and most importantly, guarding oceanic trade throughout every ocean of the world meant that the fleet could not afford individual ship losses. Tuchman concludes by indicating that the naval threat was insufficient to convince the British government to declare war on Germany.⁶

Tuchman supports the German violation of Belgian neutrality as the ultimate cause of Great Britain’s decision to support the Entente militarily. Which ever country violated Belgian neutrality first would determine which side Great Britain would join in the Great War. During a conversation between Lord Brett Reginald Baliol Esher of England and Major Huguet, in 1911, Esher cautioned that if France was “the first to cross the Belgian border’...England could never be on their side.”⁷ The French ambassador to England (M. Cambon) later relayed a similar message when he stated that, “only if Germany violated Belgium...could France be sure of Britain’s support.”⁸ At 3:30 PM on August 1, 1914 France ordered the mobilization of its military forces, at 8:02 AM on August 4, 1914, “the first wave of field grey broke over the Belgian frontier,”⁹ and at 12 AM on August 15, 1914, England declared war on Germany. Germany drew first blood but in the process brought the full weight of the English military (navy and army) down upon itself.¹⁰

“German Atrocities 1914 A History of Denial” was written by John Horne and Alan Kramer. Both authors are professors and fellows in the Contemporary History Department (Horne is an Associate Professor and Kramer is a Senior Lecturer) at Trinity College in Dublin, Ireland. This book, published in 2001, won the Frankel Prize for Contemporary History and because it sought to understand why the atrocities were committed, how the accounts of the actions were exaggerated in propaganda, what the

⁴ Tuchman, Barbara W. Guns of August. New York: Ballantine Books, 1962. Pg. 390

⁵ Ibid, 390.

⁶ Ibid, 390.

⁷ Ibid, 237.

⁸ Ibid, 339.

⁹ Ibid, 239.

¹⁰ Ibid, 239.

precedents were for these actions, and where else did atrocities of this nature occur during the war.

Horne and Kramer discuss the possibility of German atrocities being what mainly pushed England to declare war on Germany. During the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, a large number of civilians took up arms against the invading German force and the Germans responded by refusing to treat these French citizens as soldiers. Captured resistance fighters were executed, their homes and villages were burned, and family members and neighbors were used as hostages to prevent further resistance. These techniques were successful in eliminating the resistance, and helped Germany defeat the French. This past experience taught the German Army to expect another 'franc-tireur war' (war conducted secretly by civilians against the opposing army) when they invaded France; however, they expected no resistance, civilian or military, when they marched through Luxembourg and Belgium. German officers were trained to handle the civilian resistance in the same way that the German Army had done in 1870. The existence of the 'franc-tireur' movement in Belgium on the scale that Germans claimed was unrealistic. To have organized such a highly organized movement with so little time to prepare was unrealistic; however, testimony acquired from captured German soldiers indicates that, among the rank and file of the German Army, there was a real fear of the 'franc-tireur.' The German atrocities though real were largely exaggerated. While many atrocities took place, for the British, "lack of direct involvement in the early fighting and a tight news blackout resulted in 'atrocities' being ignored until the third week of the war."¹¹ They ultimately conclude that these atrocities were not England's primary motivation to mobilize on August 4, 1914.¹²

"Sexual violence and family honor: British propaganda and international law during the first World War," written by Nicoletta F. Gullace and appeared in 'The American Historical Review' in 1997. It provides a new perspective on the changing role of propaganda during the Great War. Gullace is an assistant professor of history at the University of New Hampshire. Gullace addresses two main points in her article concerning England and WWI.

The first point is the effect of the propaganda about the German atrocities on British foreign policy. The initial propaganda in England was aimed at the educated and upper classes in British society (lawyers, businessmen, politicians, etc.) It wasn't until a month into the war that the propaganda began targeting the middle and lower classes. "What began as an outcry among intellectuals over the destruction of European treaty law, ended as a public condemnation of brutal acts of atrocity committed against women and the family."¹³ The conclusion is that propaganda about atrocities never had a strong influence on the policy¹⁴.

The second point is the effect of propaganda about the Germany's violation of Belgium neutrality on British Foreign policy. "For British publicists and their sympathizers, the central issue of the war-the 'cause'-both in the sense of the trigger and

¹¹ Horne, John, Kramer, Alan. German Atrocities 1914 A History of Denial. New Haven, CT, 2001. Yale U and P. Pg. 400

¹² *Ibid*, 400.

¹³ Gullace, Nicoletta F. "Sexual violence and family honor: British propaganda and international law during the first World War." *The American Historical Review* Vol. 102 (Jun 1997): 719

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 719.

the moral impetus, was the German violation of Belgium neutrality on August 4, 1914.¹⁵ In Britain, one of the most famous phrases of the war was “scrap of paper” which was in reference to the German Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg’s statement in an interview (Berlin, August 4, 1914) that Germany and England were at war just for “a word—‘neutrality’... just for a scrap of paper.”¹⁶ Atrocities were used to motivate the common man who was the backbone of the war effort, but to the intellectuals and leaders of the various political groups, the true crime was ignoring that “scrap of paper.” She concludes that it was the propaganda about Germany’s violation of the Treaty of London which ultimately resulted in the British declaration of war on Germany.

These three sources use British foreign policy, British actions, and an analysis of British propaganda to support the theory that Germany’s violation of Belgian neutrality was the cause of the war. The sources are correct but they fail to fully emphasize that the reason why Belgium was even given her sovereignty was to make the strategic territory that she occupied unavailable to any belligerent nation. England was no longer backing France in a continental war but defending itself from an enemy who “challenge[d] the essential principles of liberal ideology”¹⁷.

The three most likely causes were the naval arms race, German atrocities against the populace of the territory it conquered, and that Germany violated Belgium neutrality. Through the use of the four previously discussed sources, the Germany violation of Belgium neutrality can conclusively be recognized as the main cause for Great Britain entering World War I on the side of France and Russia.

¹⁵ Ibid, 717.

¹⁶ Ibid, 720.

¹⁷ Ibid, 720.

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